JULY 1994

ELLERY QUEEN®

THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

BONE-RATTLING SUSPENSE

FROM

JEFFRY SCOTT

PAULA GOSLING

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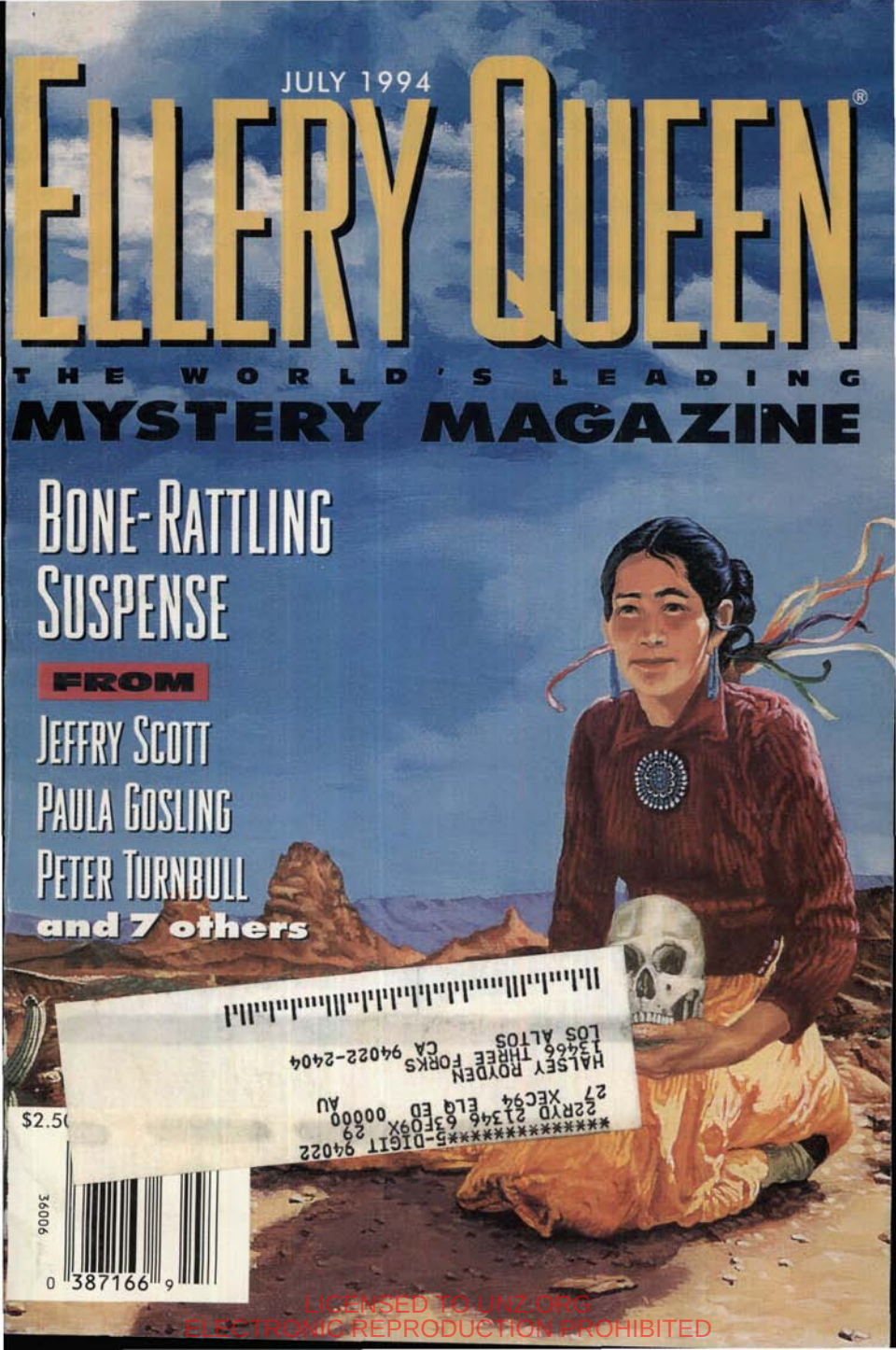

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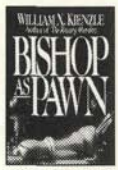

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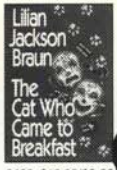

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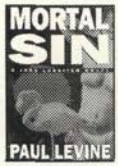

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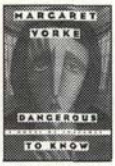

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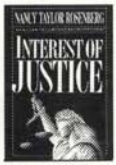

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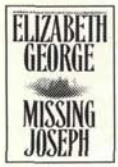

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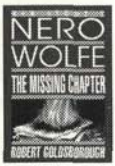

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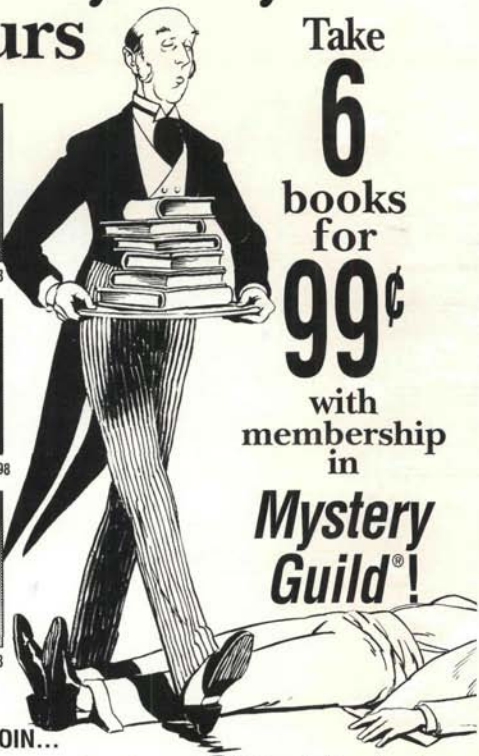

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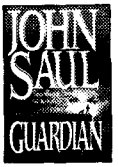

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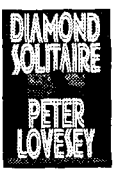

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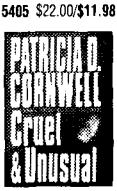

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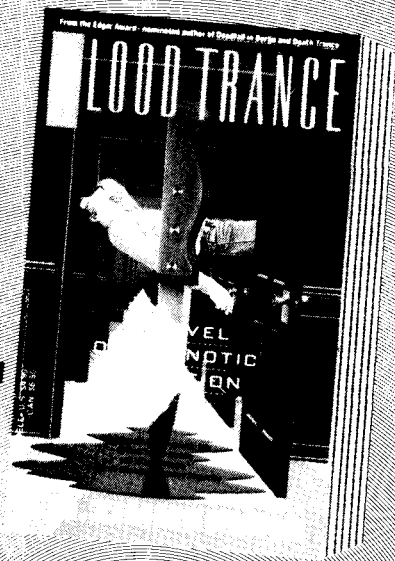

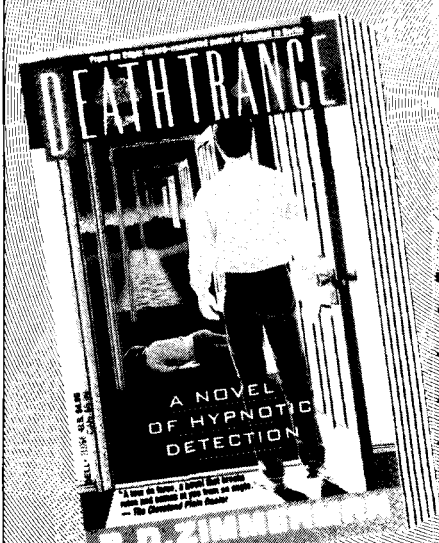

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a *NEW* short story by

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With so much of social life turned on end, wars often provide interesting settings for crime fiction. Jeffry Scott's new story harkens back to events generated by the evacuation of an entire village in the southwest of England during World War II . . .

THE 1944 BULLET

by JEFFRY SCOTT

I am not a dotard—lovely, antiquated word—but I can't carry phone numbers in my head, where until recently, forty or more awaited instant retrieval. And sometimes, not often, I go into a room or consult a file and for the life of me, cannot remember what the heck I was looking for. Momentary glitches, one hopes, insignificant. Really . . .

My long-term memory, by contrast, can be strikingly vivid, precise. Visions are fragmented, out of sequence, but I hear the voices, see facial expressions and details of clothing involved in events of half a century ago. It's worth adding that I am under sixty, if only just, and still play adequate squash and better golf. I pay for it next morning, hobbling to the shower, but that's natural.

Time may be the crucial factor here. Think of the years behind me as miles: I set out a child pilgrim among buildings looming too close and tall for their identity or purpose to be discerned—didn't the world seem much bigger when you were young? Looking back over the level plain of decades, one makes sense of the place left so long ago, seeing clearly. That's not a cliff but a cathedral, those giant sentries were trees in a park, and so on . . . The same clarity applies to people of my young days, and their motives.

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My memory reaches at least as far back as 1944, when I was eight years old. Back to Aybold Mains, and the Madwoman (but that was just village talk, she was homesick and neurotic, not crazy) who died by violence. And it lets, no, it forces me to hear again what my brave, beloved brother kept saying, when she was killed.

I wish to God that it didn't.

My heart turned over when I came downstairs that morning. Karen gave me an amused *What?* look but I didn't respond so she went back to her slice of toast and the *Daily Mail*. She had got used to being blond and gorgeous, with legs looking two yards long. I still couldn't get used to finding her in my home.

The snag being that Karen was hardly ten years older than my eldest daughter; they kept getting taken for sisters, which was less than comforting. But that wasn't what shook me. I had a nasty conviction that things were about to worsen, and the obvious reason for that was my eternal fear that she'd meet somebody nearer her age and tastes, so I ought to make the most of what I was seeing. . . . Then I turned to an inner page of the *Independent,* where a responsible broadsheet puts offbeat news, to find that the bad feeling wasn't about Karen at all.

Aybold Mains: the name jumped out and smacked me between the eyes . . . and in the belly.

Weird, because I'd loved Aybold Mains, it was my birthplace. Maybe the reflex of pain and dread was because I had been exiled from Eden. That village always touched a nerve, in much the way that one flinches at reminders of a friend who died too young, and badly, or a placid, benign kingdom destroyed out of spite.

"Look at this, Charlie!" Karen held up the *Daily Mail* with a frosted-pink, almond-shaped nail slanting towards a headline: TIME-CAPSULE TOWNSHIP JOINS THE NINETIES.

"Isn't that terrific? Tailor-made for a spot on the Prog." Beauty needs a flaw, and Karen's is to talk jargon when excited. She is a TV producer, in charge of what just about qualifies as a current-affairs show. I'd never been brutal enough to say so, but it was aimed at an audience with a shorter attention span than monkeys, if marginally greater intelligence.

"I shall get right on it," she said to herself. And to me, "Can't you see the possibilities? A town like Snow White's castle, wakened after a lifetime. It's thrilling."

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"If you read a proper paper instead of a comic, you wouldn't talk rubbish." I rustled the *Independent* at her. "Same story's in here, but with facts. Aybold Mains isn't, wasn't, a town. Just a large village. And it hasn't been under a magic spell. The government sent the locals packing during World War II so generations of soldiers could learn street fighting there. Your enchanted village was a War Office battle school—a military slum getting hell knocked out of it since before you were born."

Part of me stood aside and groaned during the put-down. Good old Charlie, never hit a woman in his life. You don't have to strike people to hurt them. I sounded a pedantic, sneering old bastard, patronising a green girl. Karen is a graduate, she reached the upper levels of a stressful and demanding trade on brains and initiative, not looks. And she hated being reminded of our age difference . . .

But all she did was retrieve her paper, taking rather a long time to put it away in the briefcase beside her chair. She looked all right when she straightened up again. "I forgot, you're from the west country. Did you ever visit that town—village—when you were little?"

I nearly told her that I couldn't have visited Aybold Mains because I lived there, damn it. Instead I said abruptly, "I shan't be around for a day or two. Got an out-of-towner."

"That's a bit sudden. I wish you had warned me." They worked Karen hard on that programme. Often the first production meeting was at six in the morning, with an edition recorded twelve hours later. Her free time was valuable; probably she had fixed a day off to be with me.

"I'd have told you last night," I lied, "but you weren't interested."

Karen had got back late, with a several-glasses-of-champagne buzz on. At a company party for network clients, she was taken aside and told of being pencilled in as executive producer; she was on her way. I would have rolled home roaring drunk and kept my partner up until the small hours gloating. She had just said, "It's a bit nice, you'll be proud of me yet," and gone to bed.

I hadn't told Karen I must go away, because until ten minutes ago, I was unaware of it. I had to see Aybold Mains, now that it was open once more. . . . No notion why, but certain it was needful.

Explaining to her was out of the question. "It's the Welsh branch office, our divisional finance controller has his knickers in a twist over redundancy payments." Karen looked so crestfallen that I felt a real swine. Hardly surprising, since I was. Human nature being

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what it is, her disappointment irked me. "It's not Outer Mongolia, I'll be back in a couple of days."

"But you're a consultant, Charlie, and they're treating you like a junior."

"Stop sounding like a wife, doesn't suit you." I smiled to take the sting away, but it didn't so I said she'd be late if she didn't get her skates on, that was no way to start her first day as executive producer-elect.

Karen's voice wavered between tears and anger when she went to the door. "Go for as long as you like! You always do this—if I'm up, you knock me down, and never say why."

It wasn't that, of course, though I preferred not to enquire what it was. Shelving the matter, I read the *Independent*'s report about Aybold Mains all over again.

The village had been the subject of a compulsory purchase order in 1944. In other words, the government made every landlord and householder an offer they couldn't refuse. The War Office—no mealy-mouthed stuff about Ministry of Defense in those desperate days—vowed we could all return home as soon as peace broke out. Not so; the army had stayed there ever since, in a No Go area for civilians.

Now Aybold Mains had been handed over to a consortium, comprising Peerless Parks, the Department of the Environment, and the Defense Ministry. Peerless Parks rang a bell; sure enough, it was part of the Ottermole Group. I phoned Ham Gradstone, their deputy chairman, asking if I might take a look at Aybold. Ham didn't know that my connection was personal, any more than Karen did. It was not something I had told . . . well, anyone, really.

As intended, he jumped to the conclusion that, as usual, I was scouting for unusual, vaguely worthy, risk-capital investment areas. "I'll get on the horn right away, Chaz. The place won't be ready until next year at the earliest, it's a bit of a mess at present," he warned. "Our tame archaeologist and minions are on site, though. I'll tell them to roll out what passes for a red carpet, lots of bowing and scraping."

Sorry about this, but the hackneyed quotation is inevitable: The past is another country where they do things differently.

So I have to explain a bit about me and my family. Dad was a marine engineer, away for months at a stretch. A naval reservist; he went back into uniform at the outbreak of war in 1939, swopping

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a sleek cargo liner for a destroyer which got torpedoed off Crete, keeping him away forever.

This sounds heartless, but there was little sense of loss for me. My big brother Steve was father figure and idol, thanks to Dad's extended absences. I was just a little kid, but I could tell that Steve was a hell of a fellow. Girls fancied him and boys admired him. A natural leader, as they say.

I must have been a millstone round a teenager's neck, but Steve found time for me. He taught me to play cricket and soccer, took me exploring in the woods, and showed me how to fish. He was very young to be man of the house, but he'd had plenty of practice while Dad was at sea.

I could talk about him for hours, but dwelling on my brother breaks my heart. Along with countless brothers, he died in the war.

Aybold Mains was a village like any other, no doubt. Not quaint, not even very pretty, sheltered in a Devon valley half a mile inland from the cliffs. Aybold prided itself, all those years ago, on being bang up-to-date, more suburban than rural. We had electricity, sewerage, and streetlights, just like a proper town. All thanks to a London tycoon who planned to set up light industry there, but went spectacularly broke once the infrastructure was in place. Dr. McPhee, parish council chairman, never mentioned Aybold Mains without tacking on, "a town in miniature," just as Homer's sea was always wine-dark . . .

We had one of the five bungalows in Dane Street. They were widely spaced down one side, with fields on the other. The bungalows were super-modern, built in 1937, and there ought to have been many more, but the builder lost heart when all those grand London plans withered. Dane Street was a country lane with big ideas, a local joke being that it had more streetlamps than dwellings: which was true.

Next door lived the Artist and the Madwoman, as many villagers referred to them. The Artist was Hugh Feather, a World War I veteran and what used to be known as a remittance man. Remittance men were black sheep packed off to outposts of the empire, bribed with stay-away money. Feather's family was not affluent, so he was packed off not farther than the other end of the county.

He'd fought in the Spanish Civil War, and brought back the Madwoman. He called her Connie, short for Consuelo, I suppose. From patriotism or stupidity, she never bothered to learn much English. Forced to do shopping, she'd point and scowl, muttering what even a

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child of my age could perceive as curses when mime was insufficient.

She could have spoken like the lady of the manor and still daunted me. Her eyes rolled a lot. Her hair was like Medusa's, always in motion, blue-black ringlets and elf-locks stirring on her restless head. Bolder small children threw stones at her, if far enough off to run for their lives afterwards.

The Artist was more of a figure of fun, a toff who dressed like a tramp. He painted every day, without (sneered village art critics) managing a decent human likeness or a recognisable vase of flowers or bowl of fruit. People said he was a bit soft in the head, but smart enough to sponge off his family and never do a stroke of real work.

Living close, I knew Hugh Feather better than did most of my schoolmates. I liked drawing, and he taught me the rudiments of perspective and composition. It made me feel grown-up to be asked into his place, which happened rarely. The bungalow was shockingly untidy and grubby, but he had no end of curios and souvenirs, and he let me play with some; others were not to be touched, he decreed. Significantly, until recently I could recall only the fascination of his collection, not its details.

The Artist treated me as a valued guest, never talking down, while Connie lurked in the hall, grumbling incomprehensibly in the throaty manner of a cat preparing to fight. Despite which, such visits were much prized—and never mentioned to my friends.

Then came the war, and there was talk of leaving a white feather on the Artist's doorstep—"He's got the right name, that shirker!"—after the Home Guard was created and he refused to join. Dad, home at the time, told us that Hugh Feather had won medals in Flanders, and "risked another packet" fighting Franco in Spain. My father, I understand now, was a special man; I wish I had known him properly.

Pretty soon Feather got a job with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, roaring around South Devon on a motorbike. He didn't mind helping the war effort, he confided to Mum, but drew the line at killing any more people.

Typically, Aybold Mains sneered that it hadn't taken the Artist long to do well out of the war. For my part, I considered him far better value than our other close neighbour in the bungalow nearest the main street—PC Bell, the village copper.

Not long after Dad was killed, Steve got called up. He went into the army, and ended as a paratrooper. That left me, six or seven years old, as nominal man of the family.

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PC Bell was a decent chap, but the police were short-handed and he was covering a larger area than before the war; even when available, he tended to be exhausted. So it was natural that when Mum needed help with the gardening, or a broken window mended, the Artist should lend a hand.

He'd drop in of an evening to hear the nine o'clock news on the wireless, when his wasn't working. And the motorbike took him far beyond Aybold Mains, which was a godsend to Mum, for he gave her lifts here and there (petrol rationing restricted us to two buses per day). With the Artist in our front room, it was like having a family again. I couldn't stay up for the news, but he'd give me a game of draughts before bedtime. So if I didn't pray for his wireless to misbehave, then I certainly hoped with fervour . . .

It wasn't a bad time to be a boy. By 1944 southern England had turned into a vast armed camp. Even in our backwater we encountered sleekly towering trucks quite unlike boxy British ones, carrying the first GIs who tossed out the first sticks of gum.

One May morning, Mum was crying and shaking when I came downstairs. "We've got to go," she sobbed. "They're clearing us all out. They've given us three weeks . . . *and we own this bungalow.* How we'll manage, where we can go, it's beyond me, Charlie."

The government (which I took to mean Winston Churchill up there in London, living in Big Ben) wanted our home and every home, and the smithy-cum-bicycle-repair-shop where our glass-sheathed radio battery was charged every Wednesday, and the school, the church, the village hall, the Ploughman's Inn, and the Sun in Splendour. Streets and gardens and trees, birds, butterflies, and rabbits, everything.

It was as if I had been sentenced to death: unable to conceive of a viable life ahead of me. I had been out of Aybold Mains twice in my brief (though it did not seem so to me) life. To Exeter for a Christmas pantomime, and once to Torquay aboard a motor coach with the rest of the school for a boy scouts rally where Steve was getting a special award.

Somebody else took it even harder—the Artist's woman. I overheard him tell Mum that Connie was living up to the villagers' cruel nickname for her. "Connie thinks I'm trying to dump her," he said. "It's all a conspiracy between me and the government and the army to winkle her out of the blessed house. The crazy part—" Embarrassed, he started again. "The silly part is that she hates England,

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hates this place. Probably hates me, God help us. But the bungalow represents security, I suppose."

Mum succumbed to similar if milder despair, at first. Then she pulled herself together, and we packed stuff and threw stuff away, and the pile of crates and cartons and bags and suitcases kept growing.

The entire community was in the same boat; eventually Aybold Mains took on the air of a jumble sale with nobody buying. Items outworn, outmoded, or too awkward to take long distances were stored in sheds and garages or simply left outside houses. We had to be gone by the end of May. The majority of villagers, bloody-mindedly British, reached an unspoken, shared decision to stick until the end, all leaving on the final possible date.

And during our last week at Aybold Mains, an army corporal turned up—my brother Steve.

Much has been said and written about the secrecy involved in that D-Day invasion of Europe. But my impression is that virtually everyone in Britain knew or sensed what was coming. They didn't know the date, June 6, but then General Eisenhower did not know that until the last moment. What we were certain of, was that a Big Show was imminent.

Steve told us that his commanding officer had let him slip away for forty-eight hours. "Soon as I get back, all leave will be cancelled to stop chaps shooting their mouths off in pubs." Steve was a man in more than age now, attitude graver and harder, fitfully kind and attentive to me, terse with Mum. Fanciful souls might say that my brother had a premonition he would be killed. Then again, any soldier bound for the Normandy beaches would be unsure of his future.

At the start of this account, I spoke of long-term memory. For much of my life I shrank from remembering Aybold Mains. Much of that was due to feeling hurt because Steve was different the last time we were together, disapproving in some mysterious fashion. Only relatively recently has the truth made itself clear—it was towards our mother that he changed.

I know that they quarrelled when he came home. As when she and Dad had fallen out, they'd shut up when I appeared. And Steve, hindsight insists, pumped me about Hugh Feather, the Artist. Mum hadn't warned me to be discreet (for there was nothing about which to be discreet) so naturally I chattered . . .

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"Makes himself at home, then, gets his feet under the table," Steve suggested casually.

"Only when his wireless is bust. But he plays draughts with me every week."

"Bet he does," Steve agreed flatly. And from that moment I worried that he had turned against me, for unknown reasons.

It was a rotten reunion. When not drawing me about Feather behind Mum's back, he brooded constantly. And suddenly it was our last full day in Aybold Mains . . .

The weather was sultry. After the midday meal, a hell of a row broke out in the Artist's bungalow. All our doors and windows were open for relief from the heat, so we could hear Connie in full cry next door. Though the language was closed to us, its abuse and reproach needed no translation.

It went on and on. At one stage frantic crashing and rustling took us to the kitchen doorstep. From the heaving of the privet hedge, Connie was trying to force her way into our garden, while Feather hauled her back . . .

"See what you've started?" Steve snarled, and Mum, startled and then furious, exclaimed, "Shame on you, in front of the lad!" Their exchange baffled me.

"I'm off out of this," he grunted. "Want to come for a walk, kiddo?"

We rambled for miles, wandering around every part of the place where Steve and I had grown up. That made sense, since the government was expelling us until the war was over. It never occurred to me that he did not expect to return.

My feet hurt and my legs ached trudging down the main street in Steve's wake. The church clock struck five as we passed the Sun in Splendour, but an approaching storm created early twilight. Steve had his beret tucked under the shoulderstrap of his battledress tunic. His face was glazed with sweat. He hadn't said anything for a mile or more.

We turned the corner into Dane Street. PC Bell was tinkering with his bicycle by the front gate of his place. They chatted: Colin Bell and my brother were fellow cricketers before the war. Bell said he was staying on for a few days to liaise with the army. Already a cadre of infantry training officers and NCOs had begun exploring the village.

Dane Street fell away steeply from the main street. It wasn't very wide, and the fat, unkempt hedge on the side without houses narrowed it even more at that season. From the policeman's bunga-

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low you could just make out the roof of our place, and no more than the rabbit's ears chimneys of the Artist's home.

We moved on, PC Bell lingered by his gate. It was a matter of sightlines. . . . Even when the shot alerted Bell, an apple tree obscured his view. Steve and I were, as the proverb goes, watchers who saw most of the game.

And what we saw, when we were nearly home, was Connie, the Madwoman, come hurtling into the road from their bungalow. Unaware of us, she made as if to go into our place, then halted. She cried out shrilly, evidently calling for Mum to come out.

I ran into a barrier—the back of Steve's hand against my chest. "Hold hard," he said.

I looked up, wanting to know why he was restraining me, why Connie was screeching at Mum.

The noise whipped my head round again. It was a sharp, vicious, cracking sound, like a whip. I was in time to see Connie collapsing in a heap.

Steve, reacting instantly, sprinted downhill to her. This was where memory processes always puzzled me. For when I thought of that afternoon I saw him not in khaki battledress but shorts, striped shirt, football boots, tearing towards the goal. Two periods mingled: my brother at about sixteen, on the soccer pitch, but in front of him lay an ungainly bundle in a floral-patterned frock.

Anyway, Steve went to her. Behind us, PC Bell shouted, "What's up?," or "What was that?," something of the sort.

Bell lumbered past, knocking me aside in his haste, just as Steve reached the body in the roadway and called, "Somebody's shot her, Colin!"

I hurried up. PC Bell, breath rasping in his nose, was going down on one knee beside Connie. I can't recall seeing the head wound. But there is a firm impression of blood on the roadway, one ringlet melting into a wetly shining worm. Suddenly Steve, having stepped back, grabbed me in a bear hug. His belt buckle smacked me in the teeth, and I was half stifled, choking on the smell of serge and metal polish while he whispered urgently, *"Don't look, don't look, kiddo."*

PC Bell gabbled, "She's dead, right enough, what in God's name happened here?"

"Search me," said Steve. "We were walking down and next thing, she just fell all of a heap. Didn't you hear the gun go off, Colin?"

"What do you think? 'Course I did!" Then: "Get the boy indoors, Steve, toot sweet."

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My brother released me, spun me round, and swatted me hard on the backside. "Inside now! Don't let Mum come out. I'll be in presently." He wasn't to be argued with. I darted one more horrified glance at the corpse, my first really and truly dead body, and departed.

From the corner of my eye I saw PC Bell unbuttoning his blue tunic. I heard Steve offer, "Let me fetch that tarp, it'll be better." The Artist had borrowed a farm cart to move their furniture, and rolled up beside his bungalow's front gate was the tarpaulin to cover it. Steve, army hobnails ringing as he mounted the kerb, looked back, saw me peeping, and shouted angrily, "Get indoors, bloody little ghoul!"

So much for my direct, eyewitness experience of an unsolved crime.

Connie had been shot at near point-blank range (a few specks of propellant tattooing her forehead) with a .32 calibre automatic. That was all the authorities established, beyond murder by a person unknown.

Chance . . . If PC Bell hadn't seen us that afternoon, then Steve could have been among the suspects. As it was, the shot came within seconds of our saying farewell to the policeman, he was staring downhill along Dane Street an instant later—and observed that the two of us were still yards away from the dead woman.

The inevitable and prime suspect was Hugh Feather. But again, chance cleared him. Shortly before Connie died, a farmer from the next village called to sort out a query about tractor-fuel forms. Feather had dismantled his office in the spare bedroom, so they started delving in an already-packed tea chest. They were indoors together when the shot was fired. They heard no report, it was the shouting that alerted them.

The investigation must have been a nightmare. Policemen came from Exmouth, but the War Office was adamant—the village must be cleared next day. Residents and police alike were on a deadline. Steve gave the CID a statement and was on his way back to camp in Wiltshire that evening. Mum and I set off to her aunt's home, upcountry, at first light the following morning. More than a week later a Bristol policeman questioned me all over again, but there was little I could tell him.

Long afterwards—on honeymoon in Ibiza, that long ago—I ran into PC Bell, there on a pensioners' package holiday. The murder

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was the single most dramatic event of his career, and it was natural for us to discuss it.

"A lot of odd fish were loose during the war," he said. "I reckon it was an army deserter, one of them foreigners, as it might be Free French, or a Canuck or Yank, they was trigger-happy if you like."

The official theory had been that the killer waited behind the hedge opposite the Artist's bungalow. When Connie emerged, he poked the gun through the hedge, at the full extent of his arm, and shot her in the head. "You and your brother, rest his soul, had her in sight the whole time," Bell argued. "Your attention being on her, you never spotted the chap behind the hedge."

When I asked about motive, white-haired Bell was impatient. "Who knows? She was foreign, flighty. Not even a wedded wife, neither. Stands to reason she wouldn't think twice about romancing other fellows. Maybe some Spanish Gypsy like herself, they're hot-blooded. Crime of passion, stands to reason."

I didn't believe a word of it. Connie had been fixated on Feather. But former PC Bell, once nostalgic gossip dwindled, wanted to get back to the swimming pool and the cheap beer. So I didn't challenge his verdict.

As for the Artist, if he tried to stay in touch with Mum, I never knew of it; and I never saw him again. Steve's death on D-Day plus three broke her; she was in hospital by 1945 and bedridden for the rest of her short life.

When I arrived in Aybold Mains, it was at once exactly what I'd expected, and wholly surprising.

All those years I had imagined it violated and soured and ruined. There was a lot of that—the high street a wilderness of brambles and nettles and heaps of rubble unrecognisable as buildings; and a medley of smells, the reek of rotten plaster fighting the scent of honeysuckle smothering one ruin. Yet the church was intact and areas seemed no more than neglected. The Sun in Splendour pub looked much the same, apart from having a healthy, long-established bush growing out of its chimney. Most surviving houses were pocked by small-arms fire.

The army had enclosed the village in a tall security fence with rolls of razor wire along its base. Ellen Parkin was waiting where once soldiers had guarded the vanished main gates. Not only policemen look younger as one gets along in life—in her cutoffs and sun

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top I took Ms. Parkin for a student on a vacation job, but she was running the Aybold Mains project.

"Our masters in London told me to let you see everything," she said, "but it's not that simple. The army has been playing bang-you're-dead here since the forties, so the odd grenade or antipersonnel mine may have been mislaid. We've taped off patches that are still dodgy—stay out of them. Otherwise, feel free."

Ellen Parkin, Dr. Parkin actually, started pointing out village landmarks, orientating me. It rankled—I had not set foot here since boyhood, but I yearned to snap that having lived here, it was mine, and I didn't need lessons from an interloper.

Sensing constraint, she smiled apologetically and suggested, "You want to see for yourself, I expect."

"There's not much left of the place." Hearing myself, it sounded accusing, sullen.

Dr. Parkin nodded ruefully. "Oddly enough, the village stayed in better shape while the army was actively abusing it. They'd concentrate on a few buildings at a time, for the rough stuff with live ordnance, and kept the rest weatherproof, meanwhile. Some were used as offices and stores, and I suspect the instructors bagged others as unofficial officers' messes and so forth."

By then we were strolling along what had been the main street, a mixture of beaten clay and vestiges of fifty-year-old road surface scarred by tank tracks. "Until five years ago they trained soldiers here for Northern Ireland," she said. "You'll find places with Republican graffiti sprayed on the walls—'Smash H Block,' 'Brits Out'—for the proper Belfast ambience. This facility was abandoned after the last budget cuts . . . but the warriors held on to it long after it was needed. That's when the village finally died."

Her regret made me ashamed of earlier, childish resentment. "Where do you fit in?" I asked.

"Industrial Archaeology is my specialty. I set up a new-style museum in Wales, at a derelict colliery village. Very popular with schools, and it puts new generations in touch with their roots." She coloured sheepishly. "Don't start me off! But John Buchan said it for me: If we don't know where we came from, how the heck can we see where we're going? Words to that effect, though he put it more elegantly."

I was liking her better. She said, "The idea here is to reconstruct a southwest rural community during World War II. Some of it will be fake—replica, to you. Reproduction propaganda posters, 'Dig For

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Victory' and all that, various artefacts we'll buy on the open market or borrow from other museums . . . wartime radio sets, kitchen gear, what-you-will, to fit up complete homes. We've already salvaged or excavated some interesting items. Excellent stuff is turning up in attics and cellars."

She broke off, with a concerned glance. "Are you okay? You look a bit seedy."

"I'm fine. All I need is fresh air . . ."

"And peace and quiet," Ellen Parkin guessed aloud, not offended. "Look, nose around for a while, then have a picnic lunch with us. That place like a chapel is the village institute. The fabric's unsafe so we don't go inside, our trailers are parked in the yard behind—you can't miss us."

Dr. Parkin jogged away towards the building she had indicated; it was a sexist thought, but she looked just as good from behind as in front—not at all my image of an academic.

She'd been right, I did feel seedy, if that covered a kind of emotional vertigo. Aybold Mains was a defaced caricature of the place I had remembered for so long. And even in its ruinous state, it demonstrated that I had remembered half of it wrongly. But for the map, and Ellen Parkin's confirmation, I would have doubted its identity.

I went exploring, and soon enough I was at the top of Dane Street. Now it was no more than a tunnel plunging down through rampant brambles. The tall chimneys of the Artist's bungalow were barely visible among young trees. Somebody had hacked the briars aside, allowing passage for dwarfs or limber young people willing to scramble on hands and knees.

I stayed where I was. At the time (how we lie to ourselves, unknowingly) it seemed that locating our old home would be too painful. One hardly needed to look: It would be a tumble of bricks and roof tiles, another nonhuman corpse decomposing.

That was how I excused my utter inability to venture into Dane Street. Truly it never struck me that a queasy stomach and sweaty hands were symptoms of deeply buried fear . . .

Lunch was a doorstep sandwich with an apple for dessert. Ellen Parkin's team had three trailers parked behind the village institute, as office, equipment store, and the last a workshop where finds could be examined. We ate outdoors at a trestle table.

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The crew was young, enthusiastic, and bright, their names skidding off my forebrain as soon as they'd been introduced. Fortunately they were talkative, since I was struggling with . . . whatever it was. Anxiety attack, unless I was coming down with the flu. All I needed to do was turn my face towards the current speaker, and try to look intelligent.

Yet I took in information somehow. Because the village had been evacuated at relatively short notice, an unusually large number of artefacts were left behind—I could have told them that, of course. A boy remarkably unbowed by the treble handicap of a stammer, squint, and severe acne, positively glowed when telling me of discovering a shed at the heart of a briar patch with an Austin Seven car inside.

"I found a gorgeous model train layout, Hornby Double-00 gauge, in the attic of the pub," a girl struck in.

"Nearly losing a leg in the process," Dr. Parkin added drily. "Tina fell through the floor, the boards were rotten."

"But," Tina said proudly, "I fell *backwards,* so I didn't drag the train set down with me. Fantastic presence of mind."

"What mind?" somebody demanded, and they squabbled amiably.

Ellen Parkin spoke quietly. "Great kids . . . I'm letting them get treasure hunting out of their systems before we settle down to the slog and grind."

As if answering his cue, a lanky youth entered the yard, to mocking cheers from the rest. He was a living statue, naked except for shorts and the knee and elbow pads used by skateboarders. Shorts, protective gear, and skin alike were a dull, stony grey streaked with the black and brown of mud or worse. A miner's helmet swung from one hand.

"Unclean, unclean," Tina chanted squeakily, echoing the ancient warning against lepers.

Her joke seemed eerily appropriate. I don't hold with premonitions, ESP, any of that bag of tricks, but something insisted that the newcomer threatened me. It wasn't the boy, as such; he was a messenger or an omen.

I was scared. Not by him, he was only a horribly dirty teenager, but by his effect on me. First that vertigo on entering the village, perceptible enough for Ellen Parkin to remark on it, followed by vague depression and anxiety; now this outbreak of superstitious dread.

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I wasn't right—and there surfaced a phrase from my childhood, an Aybold Mains euphemism for someone whose stability was suspect—I wasn't at all right. I'd never had a nervous breakdown. Was this how they commenced?

Dr. Parkin said something. By willpower, I smiled, asked her to repeat it.

"This is our tame Tunnel Rat. No, Leo, don't dare shake hands with the VIP." She chuckled helplessly. "Leo's forte is caving, so we use him for burrowing in confined spaces."

Teeth showed startlingly white in the filthy face. "Be right back. I've got to go and be hosed down."

When a scrubbed-looking Leo reappeared in clean shorts and T-shirt, he was carrying a small plastic box. Ellen Parkin groaned theatrically. "He's like a dog with a bone, every new face has to be shown Leo's great find."

He took it in good part, a schoolboy, no more than fifteen, chinless, beaky cast of features matching his good-school accent. As the other youngsters trooped back to work, Leo slid onto the vacated bench opposite me. "Tease away, Doc, this is the very best artefact uncovered so far." He blushed fiercely; well-bred kids aren't supposed to boast.

"Better look at this, Charlie, else we'll get no peace," Ellen Parkin sighed. "But I shall be showing you the really interesting material. We have pottery shards from the sixteenth century right up to bits of a Georgian tea service—smashed cup and saucer, nearly complete, a family heirloom that got dropped and swept up and thrown out in the back garden."

"Broken china," Leo scoffed. "Now if *this* little beauty could speak . . ." Perversely, he shielded the box with both hands. "All that Tunnel Rat guff means that I poke around in drains and sewers, sir. When people dropped things, they often rolled or got washed down through the kerbside gratings."

A thought elusive as an old tune flickered at the margin of my mind. I lost the thread when Ellen Parkin affirmed solemnly, "He has a terrific range of trouser buttons and kiddies' marbles."

"Charming," Leo muttered. He took his hands away. The box was made of hard, transparent plastic. The liquid filling it was clearish with a pink tinge. Drowned in that was an angular, orange-brown lump of metal.

"It's a pistol," Leo explained proudly. "Semiautomatic. I'm keeping it in a derusting compound Dad uses on his boat. The thing was

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sealed in the mud at the bottom of a drain, I'm scared it might crumble away if air gets to it for too long."

"Are you sure it's safe?" Ellen nagged. "It might go off."

Leo shook his head. "One, even if it was loaded, the ammo would be no good by now. Two, the whole thing's rusted solid, and three, it *isn't* loaded." He tapped the box's lid. "See, the slide's locked back, therefore the last shot was fired before it was lost . . . or hidden."

She shrugged, evidently reprising a familiar debate. "They were playing soldiers here for years, I'm surprised we've found just the one gun so far."

"Pistol," he corrected absently. And concentrating on me, "It's not service-issue." Leo spoke with certainty. Some youngsters collect stamps or go train spotting; he was a firearms buff.

"It's thirty-two calibre, I measured the bore. Colt made a thirty-two self-loader, but this just looks similar. The Spanish copied a lot of weapons, they made a Mauser look-alike—this could be from Spain, a Colt knock-off. Cheap thing, you can just make out a trace of silvering on the slide, but it was a thin wash, not proper nickel plating. See the butt, er, the handle? No sign of butt-plates, they'd have been papier-mâché or compressed fiber, completely rotted away."

I nearly blurted out, "They looked like mother-of-pearl, silver-white and shiny." My heartbeat stammered. Long-term memory had been vivid over the past decade, but patchy also. Now I remembered one of those fascinating objects I'd always looked forward to seeing in the Artist's bungalow. A silver automatic with a shiny white handle.

An unpleasant thought glided through the back of my mind: *Had* I just recollected the Artist's gun—or was it that I could no longer pretend to forget it?

Clearing my throat, guessing the answer beforehand, I asked, "Where did you find it?"

Leo jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We call it Hidden Lane, it's first on the left coming from this direction, where I've zapped the brambles."

"Dane Street," I whispered.

Dr. Parkin, not noticing an avowed stranger's surprising knowledge, commented, "It was so overgrown down there that we might have missed it without the old county-council plans of the village. Dane Street is Leo's territory . . . below ground level."

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He beamed at her. "I'd love to know how this pistol got into the drain. It had to be dumped there, Doc. Bet it was used in a holdup, maybe even a murder!"

It was, I told him, silently, *it was, and I know who did the killing.*

Ellen Parkin said sharply, "Enough, Leo, you'll make our flesh creep. Little boys and their obsession with guns, it's so uncool."

Leo picked up his precious casket. "It still deserves the star showcase when the museum's up and running. Sorry, Doc, got to be out of here—Mama's keeping lunch for me. Nice to meet you, sir . . ."

When he was out of sight, Ellen Parkin said, "Sorry you got lumbered with that lecture, I could tell guns aren't your thing."

"Look, you'll think me very rude, but I don't feel terribly well. I'll come back again another day, but I really must get home."

That last word echoed in my mind during the journey. Never before had I thought of London as my home, though most of my life had been spent there. I had considered Aybold Mains my true home, but it was not. Home was wherever Karen was willing to live with me.

I got back to my place—our place—towards dusk, enormously relieved to see Karen's VW Cabriolet parked in the drive.

She opened the door before I could use my key. "What a surprise." She was nonplussed rather than pleased. Then her expression changed. "Charlie, what is it, have you had an accident?" She leaned past me, checking my car.

"Not that sort of crash, darling." My arms went round her.

Karen pulled away and drew me indoors. "Have you eaten, are you hungry, I can whip up an omelette . . ."

Faking lightness, I said, "I'll settle for a great big Scotch, thanks."

"You look terrible. Sit down, I'll do the bar."

"You're not going out again, are you? I . . . I need to talk."

She swung round, making my drink slop, and laughed shortly. "God, you *have* had a shock."

"Sorry?"

She handed me the tumbler. "Nothing."

I took a stiff belt, and shuddered. "Better." It was a problem, knowing where to start and how to proceed. "I never told you much about where I grew up . . ."

Karen was incredulous. "Charlie! You've never told me anything about yourself: what you think, how you feel, what you want. You're

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an island entirely surrounded by Keep Off and Mind Your Own Business."

Normally I would have shrugged that off. It had been a reflex action, not just with her, to keep personal matters personal. But now I said meekly—and sincerely—"That's right, I can't help it."

She folded her arms. She was barefoot, wearing an ugly, oversized grey sweatshirt emblazoned PROPERTY OF H.M. PRISON PARKHURT, which on her was a mini-dress. Karen looked *younger* than my daughter—and ageless. "If this is leading up to saying you need time on your own and we'd better live apart for a while, just cut to the chase."

I gaped at her, but she persisted, "Come on, it's always been a temporary arrangement, right? I have a key to this house, but that's just a roof. All your other doors stay locked and bolted. Can't give a lover the run of the place, she might get the wrong idea."

It was a revelation—I'd always been half ready for Karen to reject *me*. "You couldn't be more wrong. Maybe I am locked up, but there are reasons, nothing to do with you."

Her face hardened. "No, that came out wrong! I mean that today I found out my head has been scrambled ever since . . . hell, forever. Listen, Aybold Mains, your famous time-warp village—I was born there."

"But you come from Bristol . . . don't you?"

"Sort of. Bristol, then another aunt in Gloucester, and on to boarding school, that was Hampshire. I'm an orphan, sounds funny from a grown man. Got passed around like a parcel. Never mind where I've been, I started out in Aybold, it all goes back to there."

I told her everything. Dad and Mum and Steve, the Artist and the Madwoman, the expulsion from Eden. When I reached Connie's death, I needed another drink.

"Steve could always think quickly. Good athletes have that split-second faster brain, lets them catch the ball, save the goal, return the service, or whatever. I worshipped him, and I was just a stupid kid, but even so . . . I must have been on to Steve all along. Subconsciously I saw what he was up to, but I blanked it out. Same as forgetting that the Artist had a gun.

"All my life Aybold Mains has been . . . like a wound you know is so bad you daren't look at it. I thought it was because I'd been happy there until the government grabbed it and bashed it to pieces. But it wasn't that. Aybold was the place where I found out my brother was—"

I tried to name it. "Wicked," I chose, inadequately.

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Chin on fists, Karen frowned. "You've lost me. You just said she, Connie, came out and got shot while you and your brother were miles away. Well, several yards, a dozen paces? And she was shot from close by. Steve couldn't have done it."

Her mouth pulled down at the corners. "Are you saying you lied for him, and managed to blot it out?"

My smile took her aback. I was grateful, for Karen had just shown me that it could be worse.

"No, I didn't lie for him. Lied to myself, maybe—but now I understand what went on, even though it's like a bit of old film that has been run so often you stop looking at it properly.

"We were walking down the hill. She came out of their bungalow. I looked up at Steve to see what he made of it, and there was the sound of the shot, and I looked back and Connie was falling down. Like her strings had been cut . . . So final, the way she collapsed, that I expected the earth to give way and let her keep going. Couldn't have imagined that, had to have witnessed it, it has to be genuine.

"Steve ran forward when she dropped. In my mind, he's playing football. So I didn't blank it all out. Football . . . because he kicked something. I didn't see what it was, then. It's taken me until today to work out—the football image came from him kicking the gun to the side of the road.

"I didn't notice a gun, but that must have been it. The boy Leo made me realise that. Brought back an extra fraction I had lost. When Connie collapsed, there was a flash of something silver. In her hand, or falling beside her.

"Don't you get it? *She shot herself.* It was the last day at Aybold for all of us, Connie and Hugh Feather had been arguing, she sounded distraught. She snapped, took the gun, and killed herself—in front of Mum. Connie had this idea that my mother was stealing her man, and she meant Mum to watch the consequence of that, have to live with it. Futile as well as twisted; if only she'd known—Mum was shortsighted as could be, but too vain to wear glasses. She never saw a thing."

I watched Karen absorb what she'd been told. "That's sick," she murmured. "Killed herself, partly to get at her enemy?" She hugged herself. "But I've known women capable of it."

"Steve caught on at once, probably spotted Connie raising the gun, which is more than I did. He knew PC Bell had only just lost sight of us when Connie pulled the trigger, and that Bell couldn't see her. So he ran forward and kicked the gun away from her body, meaning it to vanish down the storm-water grating by the kerb."

"Only it didn't go down."

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"That's what always bugged me, subconsciously. I'd already seen the worst, her body lying there, and the blood, before Steve made such a fuss about hiding my eyes. But he kept telling me not to look. He wasn't protecting me, he was afraid I'd give the game away. He assumed I could see that silver gun lying on the drain grating. Any second, PC Bell would look around—*and see the gun*. The last thing Steve needed was me drawing Bell's attention to it.

"So he started the 'Don't look' thing. Then he hit on the pretext of fetching a covering for Connie, and nudged the gun into the drain with the side of his foot as he went by. I even heard it! That wasn't Steve's boot scraping the kerb, it was metal against metal, when the gun slipped between the bars of the grating."

Head on one side, Karen was tentative. "Don't explode, Charlie, but how can you be sure of a detail like that, a little sound, so long after?"

"I've told you, in patches that day is sharp as yesterday . . . sharper. Full color and stereo." I gestured helplessly. "When I try for recall it's no good, but now and then it just floods into my head. Today, seeing that gun, everything came back."

"Okay, I'll buy that. And the thing about thinking of football when your brother was running. I've often wondered whether memory doesn't use mental pictures as hints, like those crossword puzzles for kids: picture of an egg, and you're supposed to write E-G-G in the space. Similar to the symbolism in dreams . . ."

She leaned forward. "But you could be reading the whole thing wrong. Why would Steve cover up the suicide?"

"I'd like to think he wanted to keep scandal away from Mum. He had a split second to realise what had happened, and lost his head. There'd be an inquest, the coroner asking why Connie had killed herself. That could have uncovered her fear that the Artist was about to drop her and take off with Mum. Knowing Steve, he couldn't bear Mum getting linked to Hugh Feather. Not that she was, that's the tragedy: He was just being neighbourly."

I poured myself another Scotch. Karen sounded troubled. "*'I'd like to think,'* you said. What do you really think?"

"I have this horrible hunch . . . Steve could be damned ruthless. And he hated even the possibility of Mum and the Artist getting together. To him that was a betrayal of Dad.

"I'm afraid that when Connie shot herself, he summed up the situation and saw a chance to get the Artist out of Mum's life. When anyone is murdered, their partner's always the first suspect. All

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right, she was shot at close quarters—closer than anyone dreamed—but Feather could have followed her, out of sight behind their front garden hedge, and shoved the gun through. . . .

"Steve didn't know the Artist had somebody with him, to testify that he was nowhere near when the shot was fired. Most of the time those two were alone in the bungalow, they didn't go in for visitors." I set my drink aside, the stuff didn't taste good anymore. "Face it, if that farmer hadn't called, Hugh Feather would have been charged with murder. It's all academic, since he did have an alibi, but instinct tells me that Steve would have kept the truth hidden, even if that man hanged for it. *Because* he would."

Reading Karen's eyes, I nodded wearily. "A dreadful thing to say about my own brother. But part of me seems to have been saying it ever since Connie died. That's why anything to do with Aybold Mains upset me. For what it's worth—it only hit me today—if I'm distant and secretive and anything else that makes me a pain, it springs from that."

Karen took my hand. "Whether you're right or wrong about Steve, it must have been a hell of a burden."

"Telling you the whole thing has cut it down to size. I can handle a problem once I know it exists."

"If Leo keeps showing the gun to all and sundry, somebody's bound to make the connection."

"Doubtful. The community was scattered in forty-four, most of the people are dead and gone. PC Bell was in his sixties when I saw him last, and that was years back. Say the police do get on to it, I can't see them reopening the case. It's history."

"I still think, hope maybe, you've got this thing wrong," said Karen. "Surely the police knew the Artist had a gun and it was missing. Okay, he hadn't used it, his providential visitor proved that, but even country coppers aren't complete idiots. They'd work out that the likeliest person to have taken the gun was Connie. The next step would be suspecting that she committed suicide with it, but the weapon was overlooked or taken away afterwards. Didn't they search for it?"

"Not right next to her body. The drain was only a few feet away, and they envisaged a killer running off, discarding or hiding the gun as he went. There was no time for a proper search, the village was out of bounds from the next day onwards.

"And I doubt whether the police did know about that automatic. I knew, because Feather was looking for watercolor paints once, and

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they were in an old cigar box along with the pistol. After that, I begged him for a glimpse every time I went there. The Artist didn't have friends in the village, any callers went there on business, he had no reason to show them the thing.

"After Connie was shot, he wouldn't have said his gun was missing. Granted, he had a solid alibi, but why give the police a reason to question him all over again? He'd broken the law by keeping that thing; all firearms were supposed to be handed in after war broke out. The logical conclusion, since he'd been cleared and the police were looking farther afield, is that the Artist kept his mouth shut."

Karen looked me in the eye. "There's more, I can tell."

"My brother had to be aware that the Artist stood a strong chance of being accused of killing her. If it had gone that far, would Steve have spoken up to clear the guy? I shall never know."

She laid a cool palm against my cheek. "A burden," she said again. "This is a terrible cliché, Charlie, but it does help to share them."

When we reached the landing, Karen hurried ahead, yanking the spare bedroom's door shut. Not before I noticed the bed piled high with her clothes, and a brace of suitcases waiting to be filled. She kept most of her things in the wardrobe there, leaving the closet in our room for my gear.

We looked at each other. Karen said, "Don't ask."

There was no need. Had I kept to my original plan of spending several days at Aybold Mains, a farewell letter would have waited for me in an empty house. I'd have pleaded for her to come back, but the only decision of its kind greater than moving in with somebody is moving out again; and Karen isn't good at changing her mind.

It had been that close. I am trying to change, these days, and it seems to work. Karen, partly seriously, claims that I am too old to be a new man but that I qualify as a modified one. We might even get married.

Dr. Ellen Parkin sent an invitation to the opening of the Aybold Mains project, with a tour of the museum in a repaired and refurbished Sun in Splendour. I pleaded a previous engagement. I'll never go back—except in my head.

Oh yes, that still occurs. Steve, poor Connie, PC Bell, and a small scruffy boy go through their eternal ritual. At last I understand its implications, but that makes the experience little easier.

And one level of my mind, aghast, wonders whether I remember the past—or if, imperious and uncaring, the past is remembering me. ●

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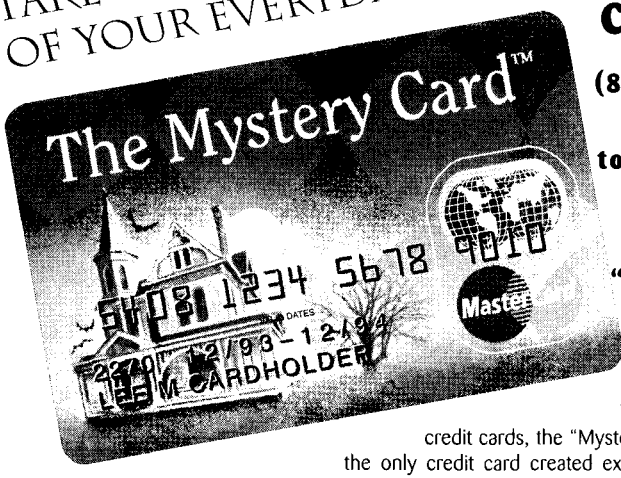

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a *NEW* Susan Holt story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This month we present another adventure featuring Edward D. Hoch's amateur sleuth Susan Holt, whose career was launched in the Mid-December 1993 issue in "A Traffic in Webs." It has been nearly a decade since we've had a brand-new series from Mr. Hoch and this one promises to be one of his best. Holt appears to be a confirmed traveler, venturing to Iceland this time after her Mid-December debut in Japan . . .

A FONDNESS FOR STEAM

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Hurry up!" Mike Brentnor shouted as soon as he spotted Susan Holt alighting from the cab at Kennedy Airport. "We're supposed to be checked in by now!"

Whatever had possessed her to agree to a three-day trip to Iceland with Brentnor, she'd asked herself time and again during the past week. "It's part of the job," her boss Saul Marx had told her. "The best way to publicize a new line is to be in at the beginning. I want you to go to Reykjavik with the buyer and get a look at this entire line of Icelandic woolens." Saul was vice president of promotions for Manhattan's largest department store, and when Mike Brentnor moved out to become a dry goods buyer Susan had become Marx's chief assistant. It was a relief not to be working with snide, sexist Brentnor any longer, but the relief was short-lived that day in April when Marx told her she'd be traveling to Reykjavik with him. "He's the buyer now, Susan. And you're promotions manager. I want you working as a team on this."

So here she was at the airport at seven in the morning, ready for an eight o'clock flight to Reykjavik. The time in Iceland was four

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hours ahead of New York, so it would be six in the evening by the time they landed after their six-hour flight. She'd had a recent flight to Tokyo more than twice as long, but that didn't make it any more inviting, especially sharing a seat with Mike Brentnor.

"I was going to call your apartment," he said with his sickly grin. "I thought maybe you and the boyfriend overslept."

"Russell doesn't live with me," she said coldly, "if that's what you're implying. Where do I check in?"

"International departures. Our seats are in business class."

"Well, that's something." She was traveling light, with only one medium-sized suitcase on wheels. It should be enough for a three-day stay. She checked it through quickly and found Brentnor waiting for her at the other side of the metal detector.

"Had breakfast?"

"A glass of orange juice. They'll give us something on the plane."

They boarded together and took their seats up front. Susan unzipped her briefcase and removed the color photographs of the items the store would be buying—quality woolen garments with new designs and colors. Brentnor hoped to have them in the store by September, or October at the latest. "They're offering us an exclusive on their full line of sweaters, jackets, scarves, gloves, leg warmers, socks, and blankets."

"I see lots of competition out there, Mike, and at lower prices than these."

"Wait till you see the quality and you'll change your mind. I have a blanket in the office that's unbelievable. They say Iceland has more sheep than people."

Breakfast was served soon after their Icelandair flight's departure. Susan dozed through the movie and lunch that followed, and awoke as they started their descent into Reykjavik. It was a small place by American standards, Brentnor told her, with a population of less than 100,000. "Look at all those brightly colored roofs on the houses!" Susan said, her forehead pressed against the plane's window as it circled south over the city.

"That would be the Old Town. See that big modern church with the statue out front? That's Leifur Eiriksson, the Viking."

"What religion are the people?"

"Mostly Lutheran, a few Catholic, even some pagan believers in Thor."

"My! You do read the guidebooks."

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It was a bit after six when the plane touched down at Keflavik, thirty miles southwest of the city, and taxied to the terminal. "The Leifur Eiriksson Terminal, of course," he told her with a chuckle. "That's a big name around here."

They were staying at the Hotel Loftleidir and a hotel bus delivered them to the door. "Let's unpack, have dinner and a good night's sleep," he suggested. "We'll be meeting with Bjorn Arnarson first thing in the morning."

"By the time I unpack I think I'll be ready for bed, Mike. I'm really not too hungry. Maybe I'll just order a snack from room service."

"Sounds good to me. We could order together in your room or mine." He glanced sideways at her. "This doesn't have to be all business, you know."

His bold proposition startled her and she tried not to show it. Her reactions to Mike Brentnor had been varied but mostly negative. She'd never once imagined him in a romantic context of any kind.

"Please, Mike," she replied with a sigh. "I'm tired."

He shrugged, as if it were her loss. "See you in the morning, then."

They arrived at the Yggdrasill Mills before ten o'clock, following a taxi ride past a huge outdoor swimming pool from which steam seemed to be rising continuously. "The whole city's heated by steam," their Irish cabdriver explained. "There are hot springs all over the island. They swim outdoors in the middle of winter. One of the springs, Geysir, is the origin of the English word 'geyser.' " He turned off the main road. "They just opened a big new geothermal plant here a few weeks ago. Biggest of its kind in the world, I guess. Keeps the downtown sidewalks clear of snow in the winter."

Off in the distance, beyond the woolen mill that was their destination, she could see towers of steam gushing from the earth. "Is this place safe?"

The driver laughed. "The people who live here love it, and I got to admit, on a midwinter night even I can develop a certain fondness for steam. Here's my card. Name's Patrick Culhane. Give me a call when you're ready to go back."

Mike Brentnor led the way into the big white building that was their destination. Bjorn Arnarson, the president of Yggdrasill, proved to be a sober-faced man in his fifties who greeted them in an office dominated by a large wooden plaque with a carving of a great tree. "Welcome to Iceland," he said in passable English. Then, noticing that Susan's attention was attracted to the plaque, he explained,

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"It is Yggdrasill, the world-tree whose branches stretch out over heaven and earth, a bit of Scandinavian mythology which supplied our company with its name."

"Your woolens are fantastic," Mike Brentnor said, cutting through the small talk to get down to business. "We are prepared to make you an offer for the entire line."

Arnarson motioned them to chairs and took out a large cigar, offering one to Brentnor, who declined. "You don't mind, Miss Holt?"

"Of course not," Susan answered bravely, not about to challenge a man's right to smoke in his own office.

"What quantities did you have in mind?" he asked Brentnor.

Before he could answer they were interrupted by the ringing telephone. Arnarson answered with a single word Susan didn't understand. He spoke a few more words of Icelandic before hanging up, his expression grimmer than before. "You must excuse the interruption. This is a sad morning for us. One of our female employees was brutally murdered overnight. It is a great shock to us all. Here in Iceland crimes like that are rare."

"I'm so sorry," Susan told him. "Was it one of the knitting-machine operators?"

He shook his head, putting down the cigar. "A young woman named Sjofn Kristjan. She worked in the payroll department, a lovely young thing. They found her near one of the city's swimming pools."

"How was she killed?" Brentnor asked.

"With a hammer. The police believe it was a sex crime."

"Terrible!"

Arnarson nodded. "I'm afraid my mind is on her instead of business today. I've always thought of my employees as one big family."

"Of course," Susan said quickly, before Mike could pull out his calculator and get back to business. "We'd planned to be here three days. Would you feel better about talking business some other time—perhaps tomorrow?"

He seemed relieved by her suggestion. "Actually, I would. There's a police sergeant on his way to see me about Sjofn's death, and I fear he'll arrive before we could complete our business. Suppose I have someone show you around the plant, which you'd want to see in any event, and tomorrow morning we'll talk business."

Mike Brentnor looked unhappy, but he could hardly raise an objection. "Fine. We'll look the place over and be back at the same time tomorrow."

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The man chosen to show them the plant was a young vice president named Jon Jonsson. He had longish brown hair that he wore parted in the middle, and Susan found him quite attractive. But it soon became apparent that this was not an ordinary workday at the Yggdrasill Mills. Everywhere they went small groups of employees stood in clusters, talking glumly and sometimes whispering when they noticed Jonsson's approach. A middle-aged woman was actually crying as they entered the payroll department.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Schwartz," Jonsson told her. He introduced the American visitors and the woman made an effort to recover her composure.

"She worked right at the next desk. It's a terrible thing," the woman told them. "I moved here to escape the violence back home, and now this happens."

Susan gathered that "back home" meant Germany, but she didn't inquire into the nature of the violence. She could see Jon Jonsson was anxious to move on, and the local murder needn't concern them, tragic as it might be. Jonsson led them next into the mill itself, explaining that most of their woolen products were now produced by machine, although a few of the finer pieces were still handmade. The plant foreman, a bearded man named Hermann Steingrim, spent a great deal of time with them, pointing out the entire process by which a skein of wool became a fine, stylish sweater. Susan had to admit that their products were superior to anything she'd seen in Manhattan stores, with the world-tree symbol linking items as different as gloves and blankets into a single fashion statement.

"I think we've got a winner if the prices aren't too steep," she told Brentnor as they followed Jonsson to the next point on the tour.

"I told you they were neat. If the cost is a little high that'll just make them all the more exclusive."

At the conclusion of the tour they phoned for the taxi and waited with the vice president until it arrived. Susan couldn't help noticing the two police cars parked at the plant's main entrance.

The cabdriver, Culhane, noticed them too. "What's going on with the police cars?" he asked as they climbed in.

"One of their employees got killed last night," Brentnor told him. "We'll be going back to the Loftleidir now."

He swung the cab around in the parking lot and headed back toward the city center. "That must be the girl they found by the big Laugardalur swimming pool. I just heard about it." He was one of

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those drivers intent on showing off the city, even though it was not his own. They detoured so he could point out the university, then took a drive through the Old Town section while Mike Brentnor grew increasingly impatient.

Finally, when the driver asked if they wanted to visit the swimming pool where the girl's body had been found, Brentnor barked out, "No! Take us to the hotel!"

As he was getting out of the taxi at their destination, Susan decided on a sudden impulse, "I think I'll see the sights, Mike. I'll be back in time for dinner."

"Suit yourself," he told her, tossing a few kronurs onto the seat.

Patrick Culhane whistled. "He doesn't like sightseeing."

"Well, I do. Drive me around for an hour. Then you can bring me back here." She peered out at the landscape. "Why aren't there any trees in this part of town?"

"The Old Town has trees, and they are planting them elsewhere. It's a long process. Almost nothing is left of Iceland's forests." He turned down a side street. "They say that during World War II the Yank soldiers were told that Iceland had a virgin under every tree, just waiting for them. They got here and there were no trees."

"Is that true?"

"About the trees or the virgins?"

She laughed in spite of herself. "What's an Irishman doing in Iceland?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. I'll probably go back someday. Hey, do you want to look at the murder scene?"

"Why not?"

He drove through the busy streets until they came to what appeared to be a modern stadium. "It is a stadium," the driver said in answer to her question. "They often have swimming meets here. There's an Olympic-sized pool with lanes marked off, and a slightly smaller free-form pool connected to it. The public can continue swimming even while competitions are in progress."

"Isn't the water too hot with all this steam rising from it?"

"That's really caused by the temperature difference between the water and the air. The pool is a perfect temperature for swimming. If it gets too hot the water is cooled. This is a popular place, especially in the summer. There's a campsite and a youth hostel nearby."

As they left the taxi and strolled toward the pool, she saw a figure emerge from the steamy mist, striding toward them like a ghost. At

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her side Patrick Culhane tensed and then relaxed. "It's only one of the police," he told her. "Hello, Sergeant."

"What are you doing here, Pat? This is a crime scene."

"Just showing an American the sights. This is Sergeant Oxara, Miss—" He glanced at her inquiringly.

"Susan Holt." Oxara was a big man whose ruddy complexion went well with his occupation. Maybe police looked somewhat alike all over the world. "You have a lovely country here, Sergeant."

"We think so. What happened last night is not typical. The streets are perfectly safe, at least on weekdays. The men like to drink on Friday and Saturday, but mostly they behave themselves."

"Who was the victim?" Culhane asked.

"Her name was Sjofn Kristjan. She worked out at the mill. Someone killed her with a single blow from a hammer."

"The hammer of Thor."

Sergeant Oxara allowed himself the hint of a smile. "No, just a plain hammer for driving nails. He threw it into the water after he killed her."

Susan glanced around. "Where was the body?"

"Over there by the bridge."

There was indeed a gracious curving arc of a footbridge at the spot where the two large pools merged. From the top of it one would have a perfect view of both. "She was killed during the night? I wonder what she was doing here."

"Young people like to sneak in for a midnight swim, even though it closes at five-thirty on weeknights. I suppose the steam attracts some folks."

"Had she been assaulted?"

"Her undergarments were ripped, but we don't think she was molested. You'll have to read the papers for anything else you want to know, miss." He walked away from them, and almost at once he'd vanished from view in the rising mist.

"A strange place," Susan commented.

"Good place for a murder," the driver said. "No one could see what was happening."

"I suppose not." When they'd returned to the cab she decided, "Let's go back. I've seen enough for one day."

"We just began!" he protested.

"We began at the wrong place."

* * *

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Susan took pity on Mike Brentnor and joined him for dinner in the hotel dining room. They ordered an Icelandic dish called graflax which sounded something like a camera but proved to be a pickled, salt-cured salmon served with a special sauce. "I guess when you're in Iceland you eat fish," Brentnor grumbled.

"There were meat dishes on the menu. Besides, this isn't half bad."

"Where did the taxi driver take you?" he asked, managing to make it sound like an assignation.

"To look at the murder scene. We met a policeman."

"That must have been exciting."

"Apparently it's an unusual occurrence here. I heard people talking about it when I got back to the hotel."

He finished up the last of his salmon. "I sent my wife a postcard. Did you know the stamps say 'Island' on them?"

"It's Icelandic for 'Iceland', Mike."

"Oh." He pushed his plate away. "How about some dessert?"

She was already sorry she'd agreed to dine with him, and after dinner he suggested a walk around the block. The night was chilly and they hurried to get back inside. "I think I'll turn in early, Mike. My body's not adjusted to the time difference yet."

"I know how both of our bodies could get adjusted together."

Susan sighed and pushed him gently on the chest. "Look, Mike, you've got a wife back home and I've got Russell. I have no intention of getting involved with anyone else. You've tried this two nights in a row. Don't try it a third time."

She turned and entered the elevator alone, not waiting for him. Later, after she'd slipped into her nightclothes, she went to the window to peer out at the traffic. Mike Brentnor was just crossing the street, walking quickly away from the hotel. She wondered where he was going.

Susan had arranged for the taxi to pick them up at the same time the following morning. Mike Brentnor seemed tired and subdued, and she made no comment on the previous night's events. "Sleep good?" he asked once they were under way.

"Not bad. It's certainly quiet around here."

The driver, who seemed to consider himself one of the party by now, chimed in. "This is Friday. It'll be noisier tonight. Reykjavik is a two-night town—Friday and Saturday."

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"So I've heard," she answered. She stared out at the bleak countryside, wishing there were more trees. Soon the mill came into view as it had the previous morning. Happily, there were no police cars in view.

"We'll phone you when we're ready to come back," Brentnor told the driver.

"I'll hang around," Culhane offered. "It's a slow morning."

They had to wait only a few minutes before being ushered up to Bjorn Arnarson's office. He seemed better in all ways than he had the previous morning. Shaking hands with them both, he asked, "Have you been enjoying your visit to Reykjavik?"

"It's very nice," Susan told him. "It could be a little warmer, though."

He nodded. "We still have snow to the north. It will stay till summer. Have you seen any of our nightlife?"

"I saw a little," Brentnor admitted. "I tried one of the discotheques last night. It was pretty tame."

The older man chuckled. "What do you expect from a country that had no alcoholic beer until 1989?" He opened the folder on his desk. "But now, down to business. What are your needs for the Christmas season?"

Brentnor opened his own briefcase and extracted a typed proposal. He passed the original to Arnarson with a copy to Susan. She saw the figures for each item in the company line, some of them running to twelve gross. It was a large order. "Could you deliver these in New York by September?"

"I believe so, but the prices you offer are too low for some items. You know, Mr. Brentnor, that our top-quality sweaters could bring more than two hundred dollars each in Manhattan. I have been there. I know the prices at Christmas time."

"The economy—"

The company president wrote down a few quick figures on his pad. "For delivery on or before September thirtieth, these would be the prices. I could make some concessions, of course, for a two-year contract."

The dickering went on like that for another twenty minutes before a compromise of sorts was arrived at. Arnarson called in his secretary and told her to type up the formal agreement. "Two years," Brentnor grumbled. "You drive a hard bargain."

"I have confidence in you, and in Miss Holt here. You will make Yggdrasill the toast of New York."

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He offered them a bit of sherry to seal the bargain, and each drank a polite sip. Then they departed with handshakes all around. "You will have our chairman's signature on the agreement within a week," Brentnor promised, zipping the papers into his briefcase. It was a minute after eleven by the reception-room clock as they left the building and started across the lot to where the taxi waited.

But something was wrong. Culhane was out of his cab, head down, running toward them. For an instant Susan thought the man must be out of his mind as he hit them at full speed and dragged them to the pavement. Then she heard the single crack that sounded like a pistol.

"I know shooting when I hear it!" he shouted. "Keep your heads down!"

"What's happening?" Mike Brentnor demanded. "Who's shooting?"

"Damned if I know." He covered them with his body.

Susan lifted her head enough to see three figures wearing ski masks run from the office next to the mill's main entrance. "What is it—a robbery?"

One of the masked men, holding a pistol and a large plastic sack, seemed to look their way but kept on running toward a small car that had suddenly appeared, driving fast to meet up with them.

"It's Friday. They were after the payroll." Culhane rolled off them as the masked men jumped into the car and drove away at high speed.

"It looks like they got it," Susan said, breathing hard as she got to her knees and tried to brush off her coat. "This is peaceful Iceland?"

"If that was the payroll, they'd better start paying by check," Brentnor said. He scrambled to his feet as if about to give chase but the getaway car had already vanished from sight.

It was Jon Jonsson, the company vice president, who was the first out of the building. "My God, did they get away? They have the payroll!"

"You still pay in cash?" Susan asked.

Distracted, he seemed barely to hear her. Culhane supplied the answer. "The hourly workers are paid in cash. Salaried employees get checks."

Bjorn Arnarson himself had appeared in the main doorway. "Jon," he shouted, "what is it?"

"They escaped with the payroll. Three masked men."

"A fourth was driving the getaway car," Culhane corrected.

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"Is anyone hurt?"

Jonsson had no answer to that question, so he and Arnarson hurried together toward the payroll department with Susan and Mike Brentnor trailing behind. "I heard a shot and looked out to see them running toward a car," Jonsson said. "One was carrying a plastic bag."

Inside, Mrs. Schwartz was close to hysterics. "They had guns," she cried. "I couldn't stop them. I called the police as soon as they were out the door."

Some of the other women were trying to comfort her, but the company president insisted on hearing the whole story. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"I think they had the ski masks rolled up to look like caps. They pulled them over their faces as they came through the door. For an instant I thought they were machine operators coming for their pay, but then I saw the masks." Her voice cracked. "And the guns! One man fired a shot at the ceiling. I left Germany to get away from this!"

Jon Jonsson tried to comfort her while in the distance Susan heard the first sound of a police siren. "Did you recognize any of them?" he asked.

"I barely saw them before they pulled down the masks. I couldn't describe any of them."

"How much did they get?" the president asked.

"All the cash. They knew right where to look."

Sergeant Oxara himself arrived in the first police car. He issued an immediate command for road blocks as soon as Brentnor and their cabdriver had given a description of the getaway car, then listened quietly to Mrs. Schwartz's account of the robbery, confirmed by another woman who'd been working in the department.

"The first one through the door fired the only shot," Mrs. Schwartz told Oxara. "He seemed to be in charge. We both just froze and he directed the other two behind the counter to scoop up the trays of payroll envelopes. Then one of them went to the cash drawer and took all the big bills that were still in it. They even looked in the safe where we keep extra cash for emergencies."

Oxara turned to Bjorn Arnarson. "How much would that be?"

"If they got everything it could have been around 95,000 kronurs," the president replied. "We won't know until we do an inventory."

"Is it covered by insurance?"

"Of course."

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Mike Brentnor, calculating quickly, whispered to Susan, "That's more than one hundred and forty thousand dollars."

Sergeant Oxara glanced around at them, then back to the president. "How many people knew the money would be here?"

"Just about everyone in the city, I imagine. We pay our hourly workers every second Friday. There are nearly two hundred of them on the various shifts."

Others from the mill, including the manager, Hermann Steingrim, had crowded into the payroll department, and the sergeant finally ordered everyone out so fingerprints and photographs could be taken. "They won't find anything," Mike Brentnor predicted. "Those guys were wearing gloves."

Susan turned to their driver. "You may have saved our lives, Patrick. Thank you for the fast action."

"It was nothing, ma'am." He gave her a smile. "Just part of my service."

They shook hands again with Yggdrasill's president, and expressed proper outrage at the robbery. "It has been a bad week for us," Arnarson agreed. "First the Kristjan woman's murder and now this!"

Suddenly it occurred to Susan that the two crimes might well be related.

On the way back to the hotel she pursued her theory with Mike. "Don't you see? Sjofn Kristjan worked in the payroll department with Mrs. Schwartz. Oxara told me it didn't appear to be a sex crime, even though her underwear had been ripped. Someone wanted it to appear like a sex crime, but it was something else entirely. Mrs. Schwartz said the robbers knew right where to look. They knew because the dead girl told them. Then, with the actual armed robbery approaching, she either got cold feet or they were afraid she'd talk about it afterward. So they killed her Wednesday night."

"Since you're not with the Reykjavik Police Department, what difference does it make? We'll be flying home tomorrow afternoon."

"Maybe I should speak to Sergeant Oxara about it."

"And maybe you shouldn't. Suppose they make you stay here as a witness of some sort?"

"But I think—"

"Oxara seemed fairly intelligent. I'm sure he'll come up with the same theories as you."

"I suppose so," she admitted.

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But back in her room she started expanding on her original thought. If Sjofn Kristjan had been involved in planning the robbery or supplying information to the gang, it seemed most likely it would be through someone with whom she was romantically linked. A boyfriend. That sort of thing happened all the time. It was not something she'd discuss with her family, but someone she worked with might remember a key fact—a phone call, perhaps, or even a handsome young man who picked her up one day after work.

That afternoon, when she thought the police would have gone, Susan called the payroll department at the mill and asked for Mrs. Schwartz. When she heard the familiar German accent she explained who she was. "I was wondering if we could meet after work. I wanted to ask you about the girl who was killed."

"Not the robbery?"

"Well, that too," Susan admitted. "I'm at the Hotel Loftleidir. Would that be a convenient meeting place?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Her voice was tentative. "This won't get me into trouble, will it?"

"Of course not. I just have a few questions."

"I finish up here at four-thirty. I could be there fifteen minutes later."

"I'll meet you in the lobby," Susan said.

Mike rang her in the early afternoon to suggest some sightseeing but she put him off. "I've got a headache from this morning. I guess I'm not used to being thrown to the ground while gunmen run by."

"Take a couple of aspirin. I'll check with you later."

She left her room by midafternoon to avoid another call from him, and spent an hour exploring the small shops near the hotel. In one she purchased a pair of bookends made from the island's lava. The clerk told her that ten percent of Iceland's total land mass was made up of lava, and Susan found herself thankful that none was flowing at the moment. A volcano eruption on top of a murder, a robbery, and Mike's unwanted advances would just about finish her.

She returned to the hotel lobby at twenty to five to find Mrs. Schwartz waiting for her. "Mr. Jonsson told me to leave early because of what happened," she explained. "He's a nice man, very considerate of the employees."

"Would you like some tea or a bit of wine?" Susan asked.

"Some sherry would be nice."

When they were settled in the hotel's lounge with their glasses, Susan worked into her questions slowly. "I gather things were unpleasant for you back in Germany."

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"That's true enough. I've only been here five years. I could see when the wall came down there would be trouble. All the poor from the east pouring into the west, and immigrants from Eastern Europe as well. In my town they killed a Gypsy family and I decided it was time to leave. I had a sister in Reykjavik so I came here. A year later she married the captain of a fishing boat and they moved to Nova Scotia. I'm still here."

"But you're Mrs. Schwartz. Where is your husband?"

"In prison back home. He was one of those who killed that Gypsy family."

"I see."

She took a sip of her sherry. "But you don't want to talk about me. You were asking about Sjofn." Away from the mill she seemed younger, more relaxed, even after what she'd been through that day. "What did you want to know?"

"Did she have boyfriends?"

"Of course. She was an attractive twenty-four-year-old woman. Why wouldn't she have boyfriends?"

"Did any of them ever come around to the mill?"

She looked away, as if uncertain how to answer that. "For a while there was someone at work."

"Who was that?"

"Steingrim, the plant foreman."

"The bearded man. He took us on part of our tour yesterday." Susan wondered what to do with this information. "Did you tell the police?"

"Not yet. They didn't really ask, and I didn't want to get him in trouble. He has a wife and family. Besides, it's been over for some time."

"Who had she been seeing lately?"

"I think there was someone but I don't know who."

"Someone at Yggdrasill?"

She shrugged. "Sjofn didn't talk about it."

"Did you like her?"

"She was friendly. I enjoyed working with her. We didn't see each other outside of work."

"Could she have tipped off someone about the payroll money? From what you told the police it sounded as if they knew just where to look for the money."

"I can't believe it was Sjofn."

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They chatted a bit more about the city while she finished her sherry. Then Mrs. Schwartz said she really must be going. "I don't even know your first name," Susan suddenly realized.

The woman smiled sadly. "It's Myra."

"That's a pretty name. You should use it more often."

She smiled. "My divorce will be final soon. Then I'll feel like a woman again." Myra Schwartz got up to leave, then remembered something else. "Sjofn's new boyfriend might have been someone at the mill too."

"Why do you say that?"

"I asked her once how she'd met him and she said he gave her a ride home one night."

When she returned to her room Susan found a message from Mike suggesting dinner at a nearby restaurant. She phoned his room and agreed to meet him in the lobby at seven. It was, after all, their final night in Iceland. "Is your headache better?" he asked as they met.

"Much better, thanks."

They walked to the restaurant and ordered drinks. Mike Brentnor frowned at her across the table and said, "You're playing detective again, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you in the lounge with Mrs. Schwartz."

"She seemed like a nice woman. I wanted to get to know her better before we went home."

"Do you think she's involved in the murder and robbery?"

"I doubt it. She seems quite nice." Susan didn't intend to share what little she knew with Mike.

"Of course that girl's killing might have nothing to do with the robbery. She might have been attacked by some man on the prowl for a woman."

"Like you, Mike?"

He almost spilled his drink. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"You saw me with Mrs. Schwartz and I saw you sneaking out of the hotel last night."

"I went to a disco. Anything wrong with that? You can't seriously believe I'd attack someone on the street. My God, Susan!"

"I'm sorry, Mike, but you see how these things can look. I turned you down so you went out on the prowl. But Sjofn Kristjan hadn't been sexually molested, and her death wasn't a spur of the moment

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murder brought about by resisting a man's advances. The killer brought a hammer to the scene, probably from his car. He meant to silence her, and chose the swimming pool because the night mists from the water helped obscure the scene."

"You should tell that to Sergeant Oxara," he said, settling down a bit.

"Perhaps I'll tell the killer instead."

The food was good and when they'd lingered over dessert and coffee long enough, Susan said, "I have to get back to the hotel. There's someone I have to call."

"Susan, don't do anything foolish."

"I won't."

She found Patrick Culhane waiting for customers outside the hotel. "Patrick, we're leaving tomorrow but there's something I need to do tonight. I want to call someone and then go to meet him. Will you take me?"

"Glad to," he said with a smile.

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

She went up to her room and looked up the number in the phone book. When he came on the line she identified herself and said, "I have something very interesting to tell you. Can you meet me in a half-hour out at the Laugardalur pool?"

"Where Sjofn Kristjan was killed."

"That's right."

"I'll be there," he said and hung up.

She sat on the bed for a moment, hoping she was doing the right thing. Then she hurried downstairs to the waiting taxi.

As they drove toward her destination, Culhane said, "It's a cold night. There'll be lots of steam coming off that pool tonight. Who are you meeting there?"

"A man. It's just something I have to do."

"Want me to wait?"

"Yes."

A heavy mist hung over the entire pool area when they reached it, and Susan hurried from the taxi toward the open gate. She could not see if anyone was there before her and she moved cautiously through the mist. It was a foolish thing to be doing, she told herself, feeling a bit like Nancy Drew in some of those books she'd read as a child. Alone in the dark with a murderer—that was some brilliant idea!

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She circled the big pool once and began to suspect he wasn't coming at all. Then she heard a sound and saw a figure looming up ahead of her. "Here I am," she called out. "Looking for me?"

Patrick Culhane stepped forward. "I was worried about you. Thought I should make sure you were all right."

"I'm fine."

"No one here yet?"

"I don't see anyone, but the gate was open."

"Sometimes kids break the lock to get in for a late swim." He moved a bit closer.

"I wanted to ask you about something strange at the mill this morning, during the robbery. You pushed Mike and me to the ground and said you knew shooting when you heard it, but the only shot wasn't fired till an instant later, when we were already down."

"What do you mean?"

"Sjofn had a new boyfriend, one she met when he gave her a ride home. Isn't that what cabdrivers do—give people rides home?"

His hand came up, and there was enough moonlight for her to see the knife. "I threw away the hammer," he said quietly. "It'll have to be a blade this time."

Trembling, Susan backed toward the edge of the pool. "You won't use that. You went to a lot of trouble to save us from harm this morning. You waited at the mill because you were afraid we might come out just when we did, while your friends were stealing the payroll. You didn't want American visitors killed, and you don't want to kill me now."

"It would be bad publicity for our cause," he admitted, and in that instant Susan understood.

"You came here from Ireland. The robbery was to raise money for the IRA, wasn't it?"

He lunged at her then and she went backward into the warm water. There were shouts and indistinct visions of running men, and suddenly hands were reaching for her, pulling her out soaked but alive.

"Sorry I waited so long," Sergeant Oxara told her, "but we had to hear it all."

At the airport the following afternoon the sergeant was there to see them off. He shook hands with Mike Brentnor and told him, "This is a brave lady, brave and smart both. She phoned last night and asked me to meet her at the swimming pool. I never dreamed she

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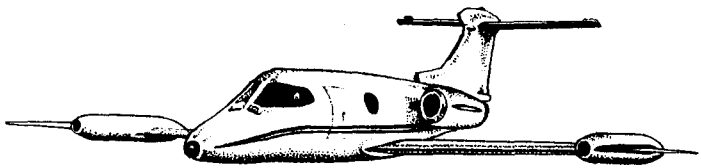
was going to deliver the killer of Sjofn Kristjan and solve the payroll robbery for us too."

"What about the other four who actually pulled off the robbery?" Susan asked.

"Culhane is talking. We rounded them up this morning and recovered the money. Your guess was a good one. They all have IRA connections. It appears the Irish Republican Army would have profited to some extent from the robbery."

"He did try to protect us from harm," Mike said. "Do you really think he would have killed you last night?"

Susan didn't know. She didn't want to think about it. It would be a long time before she'd forget that nightmare of Culhane coming at her through the mist. He was different from her in many ways, but in one way there could be no doubt. She would never have his fondness for steam.



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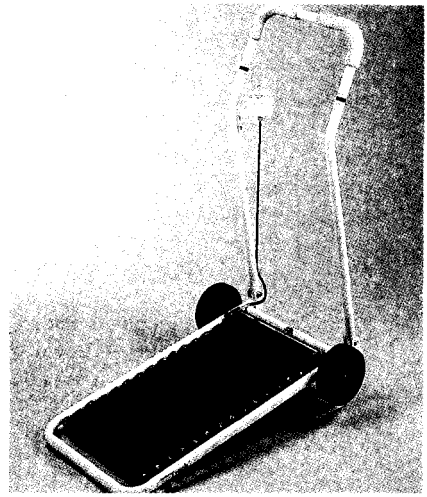

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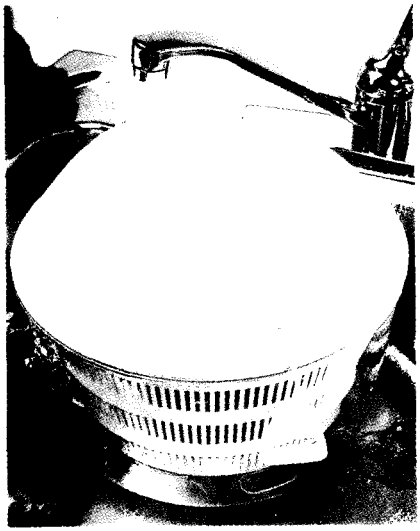

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PASSION FLOWER

by JO BANNISTER

The news of Ma McKenzie's death filled Charlie Burton with emotions he would not have confessed to a priest. Not that he bore her a grudge. So far as he knew she was a decent enough old lady whose one contribution to the world's misery, though spectacular, had been inadvertent; so it seemed uncharitable to greet her passing with such enthusiasm.

But Ma McKenzie was not just another old lady whiling away her final years in a nursing home. She was the mother of Michael J. McKenzie, and Michael J. was known throughout the East End for two things: his ability to organise much of London's vice from the comfort of a South Sea island, and his abiding affection for his widowed mother.

For years he flew her out every Christmas to spend the coldest part of the winter with him. When her health began to fail so that she was no longer fit for the journey, Detective Chief Inspector Burton made a point of watching for any unusual visitors to the nursing home around Christmas, hoping to find her son lurking under a false moustache. But if Michael J. visited his mother he did it with great discretion and was out of the country again with the police none the wiser.

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The old lady's funeral, though, was different and special. It was a one-off, a son's last chance to say goodbye. Her family and friends would be there, and Charlie Burton thought that Michael J. would want to be there too. As soon as he heard that Ma McKenzie was dead he was considering the implications. Scotland Yard had been wailing and gnashing its teeth for ten years over its inability to clap hands on Michael J. Now there was going to be perhaps half an hour when there was a better-than-even chance of him turning up in the very heart of the jurisdiction. He couldn't do it without risk, but Michael J. was a man who'd take risks for the things he wanted.

So was Charlie Burton. He pulled all the strings he could reach to deploy a team of detectives and PCs in their Sunday best around the cemetery. He attached himself to the McKenzie party, where Michael J.—who knew Charlie as well as Charlie knew Michael J.—would more than half expect to see him. The others he dispersed around the manicured lawns in a variety of guises: mourners at other funerals, fond relatives putting flowers on graves, idlers reading the inscriptions.

Burton knew, at least by sight, most of those gathered to see Ma McKenzie off on her last trip. There was a niece who'd kept in touch, and her husband, a few of the home's livelier residents, the matron, and a nurse standing behind an old man in a wheelchair.

It was to the nurse that Burton kept finding his gaze returning. He'd never seen her before. A lot of the girls who worked in the home looked pretty similar, particularly in their uniform of blue dress under belted navy gabardine, but he knew this girl was new. Not because Charlie Burton was any special connoisseur of the female sex, but because she was Chinese.

At first glance she looked neither old enough nor strong enough to be a nurse. With coils of black-silk hair subdued under a navy cloche hat, she looked like a schoolgirl of fourteen; and even when, on closer appraisal, Burton realised she was ten years older than that, he still couldn't see how anything so frail and delicate could lift stout elderly gentlemen into and out of wheelchairs. He thought that, if nothing had happened by the time the service ended, he'd offer to help her get the old chap back in the taxi.

About then, with the vicar straightening his vestments and checking the bookmarks in his Bible, the radio under Burton's coat coughed, drawing disapproving looks. He stepped back quickly behind a yew where he could deal with it in private.

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"Chief? Watkins, at the main gate. What do you make of the maroon Volvo?"

As he looked up it cruised towards him down the central avenue of the cemetery, a big dark car filled to the gills with big men in dark suits. Two of the five were wearing dark glasses, a third had a black hat pulled so far down over his face that his own mother wouldn't have recognised him.

His own mother?

"Jesus, Michael," Burton hissed in his teeth, "you're not exactly getting subtle in your old age." Into the radio he said, "On your toes, everybody, this could be it." Across the lawns he saw Watkins move one of the unmarked cars across the gate to form a simple blockade.

It was more than ten years since Burton had seen Michael J. and the mug shots in his file were older than that. He was bound to have changed. He'd be in his fifties now and sporting a tan, an outline that had always inclined to sturdy probably gone to unashamed fat. The man in the hat? Burton peered into the approaching car and couldn't be sure. The age and proportions were about right, but maybe every twentieth man you saw was as much like Michael J. McKenzie as that. It could be him; it could equally well not be. Burton held his breath and waited.

The avenue was not precisely flat so that, coming towards him, the big car appeared to rise and fall as if to the swell of a gentle sea. Still, all he could see of the man in the hat was, essentially, the hat. At the last moment before it passed him, despairing of getting a clear view any other way, Burton stepped out from the shade of his tree into the path of the car, forcing it to swerve as he peered through the windscreen.

All hell broke loose. It did swerve, just enough to avoid running him down, though the wing mirror fetched him a hearty clout in passing, swinging him round. The driver, his expression guarded by the dark glasses, trod on the accelerator with all his weight and the engine gunned to a throaty roar. Whatever the record is for nought to sixty in a Volvo containing five large men, he beat it. The car rocketed up the avenue, spun a tight turn round the astonished mourners, and headed for the main gate in a straight line that only sometimes coincided with a path.

Burton yelled into his radio, "It's him! Don't let him past!" He set off in pursuit of the speeding vehicle, ruing the fact that he had no transport of his own.

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Barricade or no, the Volvo never looked like stopping at the main gate. Of course, Michael J.'s drivers would get more practice than most at dealing with such situations. This one judged to a nicety where he needed to hit the unmarked car with his big snow-plough bumper in order to shift it out of his way. The noise of the impact reached Burton, still running, a second after the Volvo shook clear and joined the traffic on the main road.

Burton had four vehicles at the scene. Instantly they were in pursuit, even the rather battered one that Watkins was driving. Before joining the hunt he checked with the DCI whether he wanted picking up. But Burton was more concerned that Michael J. be apprehended than that he be there when it happened. "No, get after him. Quickly!"

For several minutes he stood in the middle of the cemetery, getting his breath back and listening anxiously to the sounds of the chase as reflected in the radio transmissions. He heard the drivers report, one by one, that they'd lost the Volvo. Finally only Watkins was still in contention: he'd lost sight of the car but he was blocking the only way in and out of the docks area it had entered.

Burton refrained from reminding him what had happened when he'd blocked the only way in and out of the cemetery. "Stay there. Don't follow them inside. The other cars will be with you in a minute, and we'll cordon the place off and search it till we have them."

He turned back to the McKenzie party, hoping there might be someone he could beg a lift into town with: not the niece and her husband, but perhaps the matron, who would know he was only doing his job. But the funeral had proceeded in his absence, and when he looked the matron had gone, the niece had gone, and the vicar was trundling up the lawn in a flutter of surplice. Beside the grave now were only two men with shovels.

The cars were already leaving; only a taxi waited patiently while the tiny Chinese nurse tried to lift her patient out of his chair onto the backseat. The efforts of the driver to help seemed only to be complicating the issue.

Still breathing heavily, Burton walked over. "Perhaps I can help."

The driver shrugged and stood back. The dark almond eyes of the nurse gazed at him out of the delicate face without discernible expression.

Burton cleared his throat and tried again. "Can I help you? Perhaps if I lifted—?"

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Still no response. No cloud passed over the smooth saffron brow. Neither verbally nor facially nor in any other way did she offer a yes or a no or a thank you. She not only made no answer, she seemed unaware that he had asked a question. Her fine-featured face remained open and waiting, as if she hadn't understood a word he'd said.

The man in the chair began to chuckle, a deep laugh that started somewhere down in his ample belly and worked its way up the dewlapped throat under his woollen scarf. Burton looked at him in surprise. It was altogether too hearty a laugh for so frail a man. He lifted the sunk head until his eyes appeared between the brim of his tweed hat and the collar of his warm coat. "Thanks for the offer, Charlie, but she doesn't speak much English. No call for it where we live."

Burton felt his jaw dropping and snapped it up again. "Michael J. I *knew* you'd be here. Hell or high water, I knew you'd want to see your mother off."

"It was a nice funeral," said McKenzie. "Maybe the cabaret at the start spoiled the dignity somewhat, but it served its purpose. Incidentally, you won't find anyone at the docks. You can have the car, but the lads are long gone. There was a boat waiting."

"Never mind them," Burton said tightly. "I've got what I wanted." His hand moved to his radio.

McKenzie's shot out to grip it and he rose from the wheelchair without difficulty. "Come on, Charlie, you know I'm not going to let you call for help."

Burton looked round at the three of them: Michael J. in his fifties and running to fat, the taxi driver unhappy and apparently unwilling to get involved, the tiny Chinese nurse who spoke no English. "You reckon you can stop me?"

"Not me." McKenzie took his hand back. "There was a time I could have broken every bone in your body, but you're younger than me and fitter than me and it's been a long time since I had to fight for what I wanted. But you can't think I was stupid enough to come here with no protection."

Burton looked at the taxi driver, wondering if he'd miscalculated. But the man raised a wary hand and backed away. "Not me, mate."

"I saw your protection," said Burton. "We chased them as far as the docks. Maybe they got away, but you and I'll be long gone by the time they get back here."

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"Not them. They were just a diversion." He nodded at the nurse. "Her."

Burton did a double take. "Oh come on, Michael. Lie to me by all means, but don't take me for a fool."

"No, seriously," said McKenzie. "She's my bodyguard. Her name means Passion Flower. She's trained to the highest level of karate: she can break a man's spine with her bare hands."

Burton looked at the nurse. The nurse looked back, her heart-shaped face untroubled by any expression, waiting. "She doesn't understand anything we're saying. How the hell do you give her orders?" Burton blinked, summoning himself back to reality. "Pull the other one, McKenzie."

"I never taught her English," said McKenzie, "because if anyone ever tries to get at me through her, that's the language he'll use. She knows enough to do as I tell her. If I'm in danger she doesn't need orders. And if I want her to act first I just say the word 'karate' and indicate what—'man,' for instance, or 'dog,' or it might be 'knife.' A guy came at me with a knife a couple of months ago. She broke his arm with one chop. You should have seen his face. His arm was just hanging there, and his fingers hadn't even sussed out how to let go of the knife, and he didn't know whether to run or fall over or make an excuse and leave."

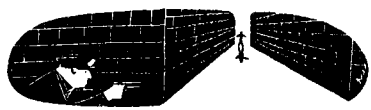
"What did he do?"

"He fell over, but that was because Passion Flower hit him again, behind the ear."

Burton looked at the nurse—he'd had trouble enough seeing her as a nurse, he wasn't even going to try and see her as a bodyguard—and the nurse looked back, calmly, without fear or anticipation. Waiting, waiting.

Charlie Burton gave a snort of laughter and his hand went inside his coat again. "A-plus for imagination, Michael J. B-minus for plausibility. Karate?" He grinned almost affectionately at the little Chinese nurse. "Karate my eye!"

The last thing he saw was the iron-hard edge of the pale saffron hand that slashed at his face.



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Gumshoeing captured the popular imagination even before the first P.I.s began to make their appearance in the pulps in the 1920s. Here with a wry tale of a would-be P.I. starved of his share of adventure and romance is New Yorker Tom Tolnay. When not writing fiction, the author works as an editor, publisher, and director of the Small Press Book Fair in New York. . . .

THE CASE OF THE RUNAWAY HUSBAND

by TOM TOLNAY

Three, maybe four times a year I represent Floorco at home furnishing shows in Topeka, Grand Rapids, or Wherever USA, demonstrating how simple it is to wipe jam off our rugs, how to lay tiles without tears. Despite too much flying in economy class and being on my feet too much, I enjoy these excursions—if only to break out and see a few new places, hear a few new voices. In Tucson, however, I heard what sounded like a familiar voice in the lobby of my hotel: a pebble-throated neighbor from Paramus, New Jersey. This might not have astonished me—running across someone from my block on the other side of America—if one month earlier I hadn't attended his funeral.

Glancing up from the men's magazine I'd been leafing through, I checked out the man in sunglasses at the front desk. While his height and build were right—six feet and chunky—his hair was too dark and he sported a pointy moustache that would have made my departed neighbor an outcast in Paramus. But the most convincing argument against the absurd notion that it was my neighbor was his attire: Samuel Perkins wouldn't have been caught alive or dead in yellow sandals and a purple shirt pocked with chartreuse pineapples. Having worked all his life for stockbrokers on Wall Street, Perkins had had a decidedly somber taste in haberdashery, a dedication to dullness that not even a fraudulent heart could disguise.

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Close beside the man who was signing the register stood the most exquisite female I had ever had the pleasure of beholding, with loose breasts under a tight white blouse and smooth, firm thighs exploding beneath a very short sunskirt. The effect was rounded off by a mass of curly, tangerine-colored hair and bright red toenails that matched her lipstick. Perkins's taste in women too had been somber, judging by his wife, so the ridiculous thoughts I'd flirted with momentarily dropped out of my mind. But not for long: The man lit up a huge cigar (as Perkins had liked to do) and I noticed, as they followed the loping bellhop to the elevator, that there were Newark Airport tags on their baggage.

With two such contradictory pieces of intelligence—that Sam Perkins was laid out six feet under a granite slab at the same time Sam Perkins was checking into the Tucson Inn with a perfect Miss July, what else could I do but conclude the Arizona sun had addled my brain? Off I went to my room to watch the Friday night mystery on TV, trying not to give the matter another thought. Next morning, however, I sighted the flashy couple and became curious all over again: Both were still wearing sunglasses, though it was quite dim in Kaptain Kidd's Kafeteria, and they chose a table that was tucked into a dark corner, almost as if they were hiding out. From my table behind the salad bar I observed them toasting each other with orange juice as if it were champagne. They must have had quite a night! Then Miss July twittered in his ear, and I would swear in court that his reply included "bonds."

If it really *was* Perkins, he would not be tickled to bump into a neighbor, so I kept my face buried in my napkin and ducked out before finishing my corn flakes. To pick up a little on my expense account, I walked all the way to the exhibition center—when you're a family man every dollar counts. I spent the afternoon sustaining a smile, handing out leaflets, and going through the files of my mind for clues. Sam Perkins had rammed head-on into a bridge abutment on the Jersey Turnpike about midnight and the car had burst into flames: There was practically nothing left of him, or so it was whispered at the wake.

A quiet horror began to stretch out within me as I realized that, with a little help, Perkins could well have shammed his own death, laying low a few weeks at Miss July's apartment, and then leaving family, friends, and neighbors behind to mourn him while he toured the Great Southwest with his plaything. And if the body the police

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had scraped up in the crash had not been Perkins's, then whose was it? Miss July's husband?!

That evening I did my time waxing floor tiles and vacuuming carpet remainders before hundreds of eager homeowners, but my mind was back in Paramus—not at home but down the block, snooping around Perkins's former turf. I didn't know Sam very well—we weren't friends, just neighbors in a grid of seven-room, one-car-garage ranch houses that were alternately painted blue, red, and green. My wife knew Mrs. Perkins better than I knew Mr. Perkins; that's how we ended up at the funeral. Perkins and I would nod in a neighborly manner at the A&P; attend a few of the same house parties; exchange occasional sidewalk banter over the deadly effects of the drought on our lawns. Looking back over those brief encounters, I remembered that Perkins had seemed vaguely dissatisfied with his life.

At 8:20 P.M. (forty minutes early) I shut down Floorco's booth —despite the stares of disappointment on the swollen faces of the Ladies Auxiliary, Fire Engine Company No. 2. My feet aching, I cast petty cash to the wind and flagged a cab, ordering the driver to "step on it" back to the hotel. I had decided to do a little gumshoeing.

As I strolled up to the registration desk I noticed the lobby was decorated rather like my living room back home, with simulated-wood panels and brass-coated sconces. "Excuse me," I said to the clerk, "a business associate and his wife may have registered here yesterday evening. You may remember them—a tall man with hooked sideburns and a redhead who's, well, hard to miss."

The muscles in the clerk's stiff face suddenly relaxed and yielded that grin understood by men of all ages everywhere when a remarkable woman is mentioned.

"It would be *appreciated* if you could tell me the name of that party, and the room they're staying in," I assured him.

Glancing toward the back office, he confided, "It's against hotel policy."

I jabbed two fingers into the left pocket of my maroon Floorco blazer, slipped out the ten-spot, and flattened it on the counter with my hand. The clerk tapped a few buttons on the computer, then glanced at my hand. I raised my fingers and in one deft scoop he had slid the bill off the counter and into his side pocket. "That would be Mr. and Mrs. Barney Smith in 2-S," he said softly, turning his back on me.

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I had collected two important pieces of information. But despite years of home study with the masters—Columbo, Mike Hammer, Perry Mason—I didn't quite know what to *do* with these clues. Time was also a problem. By nine o'clock next morning I had to be at the exhibition center, and I would be stuck there all day; by five I would be speeding in a cab to the airport to catch my plane to Newark, via Chicago.

I decided to call my wife and get her advice: She watched even more television mysteries than me. Using a public phone in the lobby, I got through in less than a minute.

"Hello, Honey? Everything okay at home?"

No, everything wasn't okay at home. Our broker had called to advise us that the check had bounced, which meant the Plymouth was no longer insured, and a heavy, all-day rain had flooded the basement again, soaking my golf bag and assorted appliances and woolen sweaters. The water heater was hissing. Loudly. And Little Lloyd's eyetooth was coming in, so he had wailed the entire night—keeping everyone awake. The noise had gotten so bad the mutt had run away, which was why Sandy refused to eat.

"You know I can't come home tonight," I said rather patiently considering the helplessness of being two thousand miles away. "I can't help it, Matilda, it's my job!" I countered. "Yes, I miss you. Yes, I miss the kids. Yes, I'll take the earliest possible flight home. Yes, I'll look for the dog. *Yes,* I love you." It was only after hanging up that I realized I hadn't gotten around to the main purpose of my call. But with all that on her mind—and on mine too now—I figured it was just as well.

Slinking into the Poop Deck Lounge, I climbed a first-mate's stool and, surrounded by plastic fishing nets and Styrofoam anchors, ordered a Manhattan to quell my jitters. While I did not see Mr. and Mrs. Barney Smith, a.k.a. Perkins, sneaking about the premises, everyone else in Tucson seemed to be on hand listening to a three-piece band that ground out barroom versions of country hits like chopmeat. As I headed into my second cocktail, it occurred to me I was meddling in matters that were none of my business, in a plot that could get nasty. A person who would fake his own death might wish, under threat of discovery, to inflict some pain on the discoverer—even if I did hail from New Jersey too.

Whether that was true or not, Sam Perkins was legally dead. That meant his glassy-eyed widow and three acned teenagers would get a laundry basketful of insurance bucks. And if Perkins *had* pulled

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it off, Miss July would get a richer tan, and he would get Miss July! Since everyone more or less came out on top, I wondered why I was getting so worked up.

By my third Manhattan I realized it had something to do with Perkins's gloomy blue house and those three gloomy teenagers now under his wife's big thumb. Overcome by a moral pang, I considered letting the suspect get a look at me and paying close attention to his reaction; if he turned red I would pull him aside and try to talk things over, to bring him back to his senses and to his family. Which sounded reasonable until I considered that Perkins would be disinclined to follow my advice: Returning to Paramus would at the very least be an admission of guilt to insurance fraud. Lying and cheating were one thing; swindle and fraud, not to mention the possibility of murder, were big time. A nosy neighbor could get hurt. A nosy neighbor could get killed!

It was not without difficulty that I dismounted and staggered out of the Poop Deck. I checked the lobby for suspicious characters, but finding only a white-haired couple staring at opposite walls, I entered the elevator and hit the button. When the doors slid open before me, I realized I had pressed two instead of twelve—as if summoned to their floor by fate. So I stepped out onto the low-grade, cinnamon-colored runner and stumbled down the corridor.

At 2-S I pressed my ear against the door. The nineteen-inch Emerson was playing an *All in the Family* repeat, with Archie and Edith going for each other's throats. I also heard, or thought I heard, the steady creak of bedsprings. Good God! They were at it again. Just then a bellhop escaped from the elevator and spotted my ear against the door. "Can I *help* you?" he said.

"Just got off at the wrong floor," I replied, aiming toward the elevator.

Next morning I woke up with a head that felt as if someone had been chiseling at it all night. After splashing my face with cold water, I yanked on a tan jersey and slacks, and jammed my soiled clothes into the suitcase to save time later. I fled 12-J without combing my hair. My best chance was to stake out the elevators in the lobby and wait for Perkins to show up, but by 8:45 it began to look as if he'd never feel like separating himself from that juicy tangerine in his bed.

Disappointed, my head throbbing, I dropped onto a captain's chair in the Kafeteria and ordered my usual—corn flakes, prune juice, black coffee. Once I got to the show it would be all over. As I slurped

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up the soggy flakes, I wondered if they'd already checked out, and pictured myself (in a platinum Jaguar) racing along the runway moments before take-off, and pulling them off the plane to break the case wide open. In these musings Perkins and his plaything pleaded with me not to tell the authorities, finally offering a one-third share of the money he had swindled—with Miss July promising to throw in a few fringe benefits. . . . Then I remembered I was late for the exhibition. Quickly paying, leaving no tip, I broke out of the hotel. In the sharp light I searched for a bus. I was depressed that my time had run out—that I would not be able to confront them, to collect payola, or do anything at all about The Case of the Runaway Husband.

I went through the day with my circuits overloaded as hundreds of families—their swarming brats climbing all over me and my samples—held me at bay. They kept me so busy I forgot about the man in the sunglasses . . . until I started packing up, about 4:30, and spotted him at the Furs for Furnishings booth, not fifty feet away. It was a perfect opportunity: *She* was not in sight, probably off powdering the freckles on her upturned nose; and with all those people around, he wouldn't be likely to get violent. Here was my chance, but it was also a perfect opportunity to make a supercolossal ass of myself if I turned out to be dead wrong.

The man was admiring a lush white scatter rug, and as he fingered the fur, I saw a spark of life flare up in his eyes. . . . Many men could have worn a wild purple shirt without feeling self-conscious, but only an especially somber individual, one who had finally broken out of a dull, grim life, could have ignited so brightly at the feel of the skin of an animal. Just like that, the chartreuse pineapples on his shirt made sense, and I was convinced it was Perkins.

Fate had thrown the culprit in my way and all I needed to do was reel him in. But as I watched him slide his hand back and forth over the fur as tenderly as if it were Miss July's back, I suddenly questioned whether what I was about to do was right. Several lives would be drastically disrupted. Possibly ruined. But hadn't they ruined a few lives, too?

A dozen steps placed me before my neighbor. Perkins looked at me without apparent recognition, though I couldn't see his eyes behind his smoky lenses. He moved around me, heading toward the next booth—Bric-a-Brac Interiors.

His calmness surprised me, so I tried to surprise him. "Perkins, I want to talk to you," I said, pulling up alongside him.

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With the crowds gurgling around us like a stopped-up sink, he faced me head-on and replied in a pinched but pebbly voice: "Are you speaking to me?"

"Tucson is a long way from Paramus," I replied.

He continued to look at me, without changing his expression.

"At first you had me fooled, too, Sam."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but the name's Barney. You've got me mixed up with someone else."

Turning away to the nearest counter, he picked up a pamphlet on fake bricks and looked it over. But the attempt to disguise his voice had only solidified my conviction. I stepped up behind him. "You don't seem to understand, Sam. I've got the whole thing figured out."

He stiffened and about-faced: "Listen, pal, I don't know what your problem is—but I suggest you bother someone else."

"All I want to do—"

His neck enlarged, his shoulders rose, shutting me up in mid-sentence. Another word and he would've escorted me out of the exhibition center at the point of the gun I was sure he had in his pocket. Just then he spotted Miss July approaching, and a large, close-fitting smile exposed his teeth. Perkins took several strides towards her and stopped, and when the sunskirt came up to him, he said something that caused her to peek at me.

To this day I'm not sure why I was not governed by the instinct for self-preservation that usually guides me through life's close-calls. Taking a breath that hurt, I stepped up to the two of them and said, "Sam, I just have to say . . . you're a lucky son of a gun."

Sam and Miss July stood stiff and still. At last Sam's mouth loosened into a painful-looking grin. Then he grabbed his partner's elbow and began moving past the display of wood-burning stoves. "You run into a lot of loonies at these expositions," he said as he guided her away.

Long after the couple had disappeared, I gazed out onto the floor—the collective human shapes and motions a mottled blur before my eyes, their sounds swirling past like the roar of the Twentieth Century Limited, hell-fired to Las Vegas. Then my eyes found the large, black-ringed clock over the security booth. I bent down, gripped my sample case, and hurried to catch my plane.

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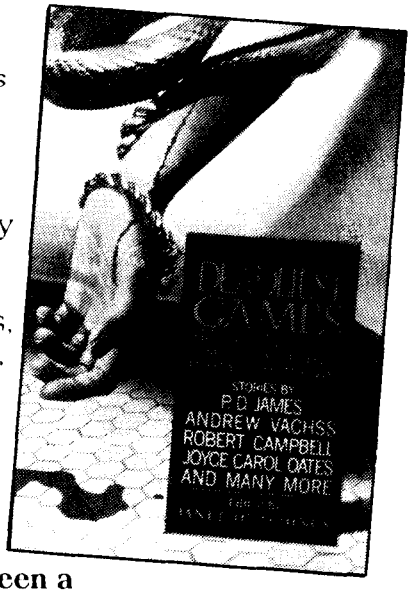

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Born in Detroit, Michigan, Paula Gosling has spent most of her working life in the United Kingdom. She is the author of a dozen novels and is notable among the many excellent women writers in our field in very often choosing a man for her central character. Her new story for EQMM *takes us to London for a busy day of Saturday shopping . . .*

THE SATURDAY SHOPPER

by PAULA GOSLING

Now, everyone knows what a thief looks like, don't they? Shifty. Greedy. Nasty. Of course.

One doesn't expect a thief to have clear grey eyes, dark brown hair with a tendency to curl, and a devastating smile. Or to be neatly dressed (but never ostentatious), and courteous with it, do they?

But Tim Mayberry was *all* these things—and Tim was a thief.

He, of course, did not call it thieving.

He called it *The Game,* and he only played it on Saturdays, when he had nothing better to do.

It began like this:

First, he went to a stationer's and purchased a box of plastic-enclosed lapel badges, the kind used for conferences. Cost—about eleven pounds for one hundred. Then he bought a printing set—a child's was adequate, for his hand was steady. Cost—six pounds fifty. Total outlay well under the twenty mark.

The next thing was to choose some good names. Sound, simple, reliable names—to match one's appearance. Charles Bingham. Steven Hadfield. George Murray. Howard Richardson. David Greene. Robert Jenkins. James Hawthorne. A hundred names for a hundred Saturdays.

He printed these good names on the cards that fitted into the plastic holders. And added two more words to each: SALES ASSISTANT.

That was easy. Anybody could do that.

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You could do that.

But making the badges is only the first step in The Game. The basic preparation, so to speak. Actual Play begins early on a given Saturday morning, and *must* end the same day.

The hard part, the really difficult part, is shopping for the right shop in which to begin The Game. It has to be one that is crowded. One that sells popular items, preferably in quantity, and fast. One in which there are too few sales assistants—and one in which nobody wears uniforms or coveralls, but simply neat clothing, dark blue or black and white. And, most important of all, one not used recently for this part of The Game. The best is a large department store in the throes of a sale.

You know what that's like, don't you? We ALL know what that's like. Run in, run around, seize what you want before that hefty woman in the beret or that sneaky little weasel in the greasy scarf gets it, then look for help.

And look. And look. And look.

There are two sales assistants over there looking for red or blue in a large size, three standing in the corner laughing, one arguing with the manager about holiday dates, and one actually dealing with a customer.

And there you stand, credit card in hand, ready to buy—and totally ignored. So annoying.

Then He appears—Charles Middleton, Sales Assistant. It says so, right on his lapel badge. And he is so kind, so attractive, so ready to help.

"These two jumpers and this skirt, madam? What a good match—you *have* been lucky. Ah, it comes to just over the fifty-pound mark, I'll have to get it authorised. Back in a jiffy," he says and smiles such a nice smile.

You watch him go, and you gaze around complacently, so delighted to have achieved a Find as well as a Bargain, so relieved to have beaten the others to it, so patient now that you're being looked after by that nice young man.

He'll be back in a minute.

My goodness, that redheaded woman is never going to take that jumper, is she? Two sizes too small and the last colour in the world she should wear. And look at those two—fighting over that pair of trousers. End up with a leg each if they aren't careful.

It's getting late, you have other departments to go to.

Wish that chap would hurry.

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Well, who would believe it—here's Mavis who used to live next door and hasn't she gone downhill? Darling, hello! You look wonderful! Yes—just jumped in and got what I wanted, right away. Well, you know how awful these sales can be. Found what you were looking for? Oh, shame. Still, large sizes can be awkward, can't they? Yes, and small sizes, too. Of course.

Well, I'm just waiting for my authorisation—you know, they have to check when you're spending quite a bit. Have to make sure.

I suppose it takes time to get through. On a Saturday. During the sales. How is Harry, by the way, still off work with his back? Oh, yes, it can be difficult. How long has it been? Nineteen months? Goodness me. About as long as that dim-witted sales assistant has been gone with my jumpers, skirt, and credit card. I think I'd better see what's keeping him.

Too late, my friend.

That nice young sales assistant was Tim Mayberry.

The Game is afoot.

Your carefully chosen two sweaters and a skirt have been tossed back onto the sale counter and have been seized, variously, by a near-sighted old woman, a teenaged girl, and a boy looking for a cheap present for his sister.

One credit card, *your* credit card, is on its way out of the store, in Tim Mayberry's wallet.

Because Tim is going Saturday shopping.

If he needs anything for the flat, anything specific, like a new toaster, fresh curtains, a pillow, a footstool, cutlery, etc., he purchases it first.

He has excellent taste, as one would expect. Friends, coming to his flat, are amazed that he could live in such luxury on the relatively modest salary he obtains from his job.

"Just luck and good management," he says airily. "You have to budget for things you really want, you know." And the friends, who are always overdrawn and wanting more, nod sagely and feel like kicking him. Tim would be amazed at the number of times people, people he likes really well, were on the verge of kicking him. But they never do. Well, it's just old Tim, isn't it? Old Tim being Old Tim.

And they smile through gritted teeth.

So might you—except Tim is shopping with your money.

The things he requires to keep himself comfortable and happy in congenial surroundings come at the top of the Saturday shopping

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list. Then, if *he* is overdrawn and wanting more, he moves on to other purchases. Electrical goods. Watches. Cameras. The occasional small silver piece. Nothing over the store's floor limit, of course. Nothing that would make a sales assistant have to ring for verification. Oh no.

He works quickly and steadily. Tim is noted for being a good worker—Mr. Simmons, his boss, thinks the world of Tim and relies on him more and more as the years go by. Why, it's getting to the point where Tim practically runs the department.

When Tim completes his Saturday shopping, he places the goods in his car. Then, wearing gloves of course, he carefully breaks the credit card into two pieces, wraps them in paper, and inserts them into an envelope. Then he posts the broken credit card back to the credit company. After all, one doesn't want the wrong people getting hold of the thing, does one? People who don't know where to draw the line.

This evening, dressed quite differently, and barely recognisable to his friends if they'd seen him, Tim will dispose of the excess goods he has acquired through one of several outlets he has cultivated for the purpose—accepting cash only, of course.

And then he has all of Sunday to relax.

Saturday shopping can be *so* exhausting.

It was a Saturday in August. Tim had been out the night before, but the girl was new and there was ahead of him the prospect of a protracted wooing before any satisfactory relationship could be established. Satisfactory on his terms, that is. He had everything he needed at the moment, and there was even cash in the bank.

But he was bored.

August, he thought. Sales, he thought. Time, he thought, to play The Game.

He dressed carefully and went to a large department store, choosing the music department as the most likely spot to begin. People went quite mad in Music, sometimes.

After about four minutes, a large, well-dressed man emerged from the scrum red-faced, perspiring, but triumphant, bearing in one hand a collection of compact disks, and in the other, his wallet. Tim moved in smoothly. Ten minutes later he emerged from the store and walked along the street, putting some sensible distance between himself, the store, and the red-faced man who'd been in such a hurry.

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Stopping in a small cafe, he ordered coffee and took it to a table at the back where he spent another ten minutes practicing the signature of one G. Bannerman—an easy task, as G. Bannerman was obviously a man who was usually in a hurry. The signature consisted of little more than his initial and a few curved lines. As everyone's signature varies quite a lot, all that would be required when using the card would be a reasonable facsimile of G. Bannerman's scrawl—and an apologetic smile as one made a fuss about the difficulties encountered in signing a small, slippery piece of translucent paper on top of a glass counter. Spaces for customers to sign credit card vouchers are usually cramped, cluttered, and casual.

Tim finished his coffee—which had been surprisingly palatable. Come to think of it, he *could* use a good electric percolator. He'd tried the filter machines and found their product lacking a certain robustness of flavour. No—a percolator it would be. And, of course, an electric coffee grinder. And an assortment of exotic beans from which to concoct his own personal blend. The perfect Sunday amusement—he was quite looking forward to it, already.

First the percolator. He continued for a few blocks and found a shop, quite a good shop, actually, and chose the percolator he wanted. Tall and shapely, the percolator would add a note of elegance to his kitchen. He took it to the counter and produced the credit card. The sales assistant smiled and went away to get the appropriate form, while Tim gazed around the shop and decided he must remember to buy cream on the way home as well. His perfect personal blend of coffee, once discovered, would deserve the best cream. And perhaps a few pastries—

"Excuse me, sir, I wonder if I might have a word?"

It was the manager.

"Yes?" Tim said, with a confident smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I wonder if you would mind stepping into my office for a moment?"

Tim glanced at his watch. "I really haven't time, I'm meeting my wife—in fact, I'm late already."

"Yes—but it won't take long, sir. This way?"

There was another man standing beside the manager. He was quite large. He was *not* smiling. Tim went.

He couldn't imagine what had gone wrong—he'd only taken the credit card an hour ago. There was no way that the credit card company could have alerted every store in the city that it was stolen. Shop lists were issued weekly, not daily, and the cost of the percola-

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tor was well below the notifiable limit. It was very strange.

Perhaps it would be about something else altogether.

But it wasn't.

"Can you produce further identification, Mr. . . . ah . . . Bannerman?" the manager enquired, when they reached his office.

"No—sorry, just came out with the card and some loose change. In a hurry, you see. Have to meet the wife," Tim explained with deep sincerity, one man to another.

"But this is a stolen credit card, sir," the manager said. "I am afraid we will have to hold it, and you, for the police. They are on their way."

"But I don't understand—" Tim protested.

The manager took a piece of paper from his desk and showed it to Tim. "There you are, sir. On the new list that arrived this morning. 'G. Bannerman.' Stolen two weeks ago."

Tim was deeply shocked. He thought back to the red-faced man he'd gotten the card from. The man who had been in such a hurry!

Still using a card that had been stolen *two weeks* ago?

Damn.

Somebody wasn't playing The Game.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Michael Crichton, who began writing paperback crime novels as John Lange while a Harvard medical student in the sixties and made his first major success under his own name with *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), is the rare fiction writer who never repeats himself. Long one of the most versatile and inventive of bestselling novelists, lately he has also been one of the most controversial. His 1992 book *Rising Sun* and its somewhat milder 1993 movie version were the targets of Japan-bashing accusations, and his latest, topping the fiction charts as I write, takes on the issue of sexual harassment in a way calculated to provoke a variety of responses.

*** Michael Crichton: *Disclosure,* Knopf, $24. Tom Sanders, an executive in a Seattle computer firm, is unexpectedly passed over for promotion. His new boss is Meredith Johnson, with whom he had a sexual relationship years before, and it becomes obvious the first day of their new association that she is still attracted to him. He charges female-on-male harassment, and the story speeds on from there. The novel has all of the characteristics you associate with Crichton: compulsive readability; an efficient, inconspicuous prose style; vividly if not deeply realized characters; and a strong strain of technology (in this case, some fascinating stuff about virtual reality). This is not quite as good a book as *Rising Sun* or *A Case of Need,* nor is it as much of a crime or mystery novel in the conventional sense, though there surely are strong elements of both in it. Despite finding a bit of stop-picking-on-the-guys whining along the way, I believe Crichton's critics are once again off base: by showing a sexual harassment case from the point of view of a male victim, he doesn't minimize the plight of a woman in that situation but rather illustrates it in a way that permits more readers to identify with it.

*** Lia Matera: *Face Value,* Simon and Schuster, $20. Like Crichton, Matera combines a sex-related social issue (pornography) with a technological angle (computer 'morphing') as San Francisco lawyer Laura DiPalma takes the case of a female follower of Brother Mike, a spiritual guru whose acolytes wind up on the shelves of adult video stores. Another solidly entertaining and thought-provoking entry from a reliable pro.

*** Bill Shoemaker: *Stalking Horse,* Fawcett Columbine, $21.95. The first novel signed by the great retired jockey introduces former rider Coley Killebrew, warned off several years ago in a race-fixing scandal and now operating a Los

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Angeles restaurant. Sharing sleuthing duties is Raymond Edgar Starbuck, a racing official turned investigator who was responsible for banning Killebrew—and whose Amazonian blond daughter Lea becomes romantically involved with the disgraced ex-jockey. The novel is humorously written, complexly plotted, and rich in quirky characters, exciting action, and a vivid New Orleans background. The accompanying publicity credits novelist Dick Lochte with assisting Shoemaker in the writing.

** Parnell Hall: *Blackmail,* Mysterious, $19.95. New Yorker Stanley Hastings is one of that group of humorous private eyes—others include Michael Z. Lewin's Albert Samson, Howard Engel's Benny Cooperman, and John Lutz's Nudger—whose appeal is based on how little they resemble the traditional hardboiled shamus. Stanley's cases also have going for them some of the deftest and trickiest puzzle-plotting in the field today. This time, Hastings gets a seemingly simple job as intermediary for an alleged blackmail victim. As the corpses and complications pile up, he gets capable assistance from wife Alice and lawyer Richard Rosenberg, who (like Steve Winslow in the series Hall writes as J.P. Hailey) thinks like an Erle Stanley Gardner character.

*** William Sanders: *A Death on 66,* St. Martin's, $20.95. In his second case, Oklahoma novelist and sometime sleuth Taggart Roper is asked by musician Hondo Loomis, now running the Flying Tiger Club, an aviation-themed nightspot on the old Route 66, to find out if the vandal and threatening-letter-writer plaguing him is an out-of-control teenager or someone more menacing. Roper and reporter girlfriend Rita Ninekiller are endearing characters, and Cherokee novelist Sanders's depiction of the frustrations of the writing life is an added plus. One of the critics quoted on the back jacket likens Sanders to Kinky Friedman. If you, like me, have never been able to get through more than a couple chapters of Friedman's jokey prose, feel free to ignore the comparison. (One nagging question: how is Roper so sure a person with the first name Fallon will prove to be a woman?)

** Jim Thompson: *King Blood,* Armchair Detective Library/Penzler, $20. Another Oklahoma-based (and otherwise totally dissimilar) novel, this is something of an event, the first American edition of a book written by the legendary Thompson in 1954 and only published in Great Britain in 1973. It is neither the classic the accompanying publicity proclaims nor quite the "dud" or "stinkeroo" James Ellroy calls it in his candid two-page introduction. A turn-of-the-century western involving a typical Thompson cast of thieves, con artists, and murderers, several in the family of a wealthy cattleman, it includes the author's lawman father as a secondary character. Though there are marks of haste and carelessness in the writ-

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ing and the ambition to create an Oklahoma *King Lear* is hardly achieved, there are enough powerful and funny scenes and interesting historical tidbits to recommend it even to the curious reader who is not already a Thompson fan. If the novel is no gem, Ellroy's introduction, in which he calls the book "Shakespeare ravaged by airplane glue" and the author "a geek Dostoevski," certainly is.

Also from the Armchair Detective Library is Ed McBain's 1958 novel *Killer's Payoff* (Penzler, $20), one of the early 87th Precinct novels that first appeared in paperback original. The author's fascinating new introduction tells us this is the second book in which, under orders from his editor, he tried to phase out staid married man Steve Carella in favor of a new romantic private-eye-like hero, Cotton Hawes. Carella, who remains over thirty-five years later the lead cop in the series, obviously got the last laugh.

Lawrence Block, long respected as a prolific and reliable pro, has lately achieved his proper recognition as one of the giants of the crime and mystery genre. Among his works are several volumes on the writer's craft, including the recently reprinted 1981 book, *Telling Lies for Fun & Profit: A Manual for Fiction Writers* (Quill/Morrow, $10), which includes a new introduction by Sue Grafton. The chapters, often funny and always pointed, originally appeared in Block's *Writer's Digest* column.

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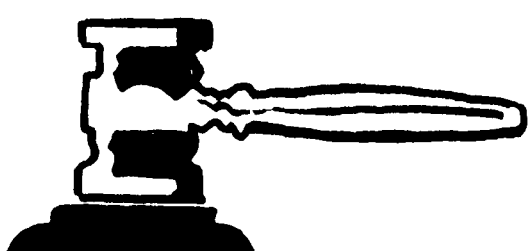

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Readers of the first mystery EQMM *published featuring Navajo police detective Stillman ("A Stranger Among Them"—December, 1993) will have seen that story under the byline Lea Cash-Domingo. The author has since decided to abandon that pseudonym, so look for future Stillman stories, and the book the author has in the works, under her real name, Judith Lea Koretsky. . . .*

A DELICATE BALANCE

by JUDITH LEA KORETSKY

Thunderous rain on the mesa cast long shadowy streaks on furnace-red, taffylike rock spires. Tribal Officer Stillman sipped cola as he headed through red-rock country on his way to take a complaint of vandalism in Dinnehotso. He savored the peaceful landscape with its crevice-creased cliffs, its rare stretches of grass, its rosy orange buttes like flagships on the horizon. Savored the inactivity.

Sunlight broke through the clouds, saturating an airstrip and a field of waist-high grass. Yellow wildflowers, like brilliant splashes of color, made the field seem intensely vital, as if in that moment the wind-bent grass and the organlike rock formation rising from its center were a magical whole.

A loud engine roar shattered the quiet. Stillman shot a glance out the window and saw a wing bearing down at him. In moments it'd take off the top of his head!

He swerved instinctively onto a side road, narrowly missing a boy with a dog and a herd of goats. Cursing, he careened over loose tumbleweed, spinning the steering wheel left to avoid a fence, right to avoid a ditch, then skidded to a halt, brown cherry cola, fizzing and frothy, dripping over the seat onto his two-way radio. Stillman stomped on his clutch and shoved the gear shift into neutral. He slammed on the emergency brake and leaned back.

It'd been a close call. Too close for comfort. He grabbed the cola bottle and emptied the remaining liquid onto the dirt road. What a

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crazy stunt! Or was it drunken stupidity? He ought to arrest the pilot.

The plane tottered into the field. It bounced along, scraping the organlike formation of Church Rock, finally crashing against two tall narrow rocks that resembled bent fingers.

A shotgun blast resounded. Something was very wrong. Stillman ran across the highway through waist-high grass to the disabled, smoking plane. He yanked open the door and stumbled past a curtained partition over loose artifacts of red, white, and black pottery to the cockpit. The pilot sprawled across the throttle, his face covered with blood. He was in his mid thirties, light-skinned but with Dine features. Stillman felt for the faint pulse in the pilot's carotid artery.

Years of training told him this was an active crime scene. As he strained to discern the sights and sounds and smells and took in the pattern of soot and burned powder of the bullet's entrance wound in the pilot's left temple, something hard struck him on the back of the head. He staggered dizzily toward the controls and raised his arms to protect his head from the inevitable fall.

Stillman startled awake, surprised to find himself in a wash. Cool water bathed his aching head. Cottonwood trees stirred at the outer limits of his vision, and small pieces of cotton floated on a light wind. He stood, disoriented. An herbaceous smell drifted in the wind. He thought he might be in Aguasal or Chinle Wash but knew if that were so, he had been transported and deposited nearly ten miles south of the crash site. And for what purpose? So a killer could make sure his victim was dead?

Stillman walked up the bank to the road. Despite a throbbing headache, he remembered things he hadn't been aware of seeing. A half-empty Styrofoam cup of coffee near the controls. The abraded edges over the left temple of the entrance wound. Pieces of skull and flesh sticking to the right wall. Stillman hoped that if the body turned up, even with evidence having been destroyed, his memory could assure the man's death was not mistakenly viewed as an accident.

He gazed at a handful of single-wide mobile homes and satellite dishes. Across the road a yellow sign blinked on and off with a message to seasonal tourists, "Anasazi Coffee Shop and Gas." He was at Laguna Creek outside Kayenta, a mere two miles north of the crash.

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He hitched a ride back to his truck and walked again toward the aircraft, examining the ground. Slash marks from a truck or pickup disfigured the grass. Plaster of Paris molds sent to the trace lab for tire identification and Instamatic photos might help to build a case for the special agent lucky enough to inherit this crime scene.

He looked inside the plane. Everything—the pilot, the artifacts, the boxes—was gone. So were the Styrofoam cup and scattered pieces of skull and flesh. The cleanup suggested murder. But would federal agents be able to prove murder? There was nothing so tiring to a federal agent as the unexplained absence of a dead Indian.

The plane trembled like a fragile shell, its innards charcoaled and empty, heaving him from one side and then pitching him to the other. He scrambled outside it, walked to his truck, then radioed his boss at the police substation in Chinle to say why he was detained and suggest the site be combed by a team of special agents.

Four hours later, after he walked two FBI agents through the crime scene and answered what seemed like a hundred questions, he headed up the road to take the now day-old complaint of vandalism at the school.

Two yellow school buses were parked in front of the large double-wide mobile that served as the Bureau of Indian Affairs school at Dinnehotso. Stillman went inside the first door to the administrative office. A secretary told him where to find Gladys Foster.

"It's about my family," Gladys said, gently guiding him onto a porch out of earshot of her fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade charges.

He glanced at a thin line of black sediment visible in the wall of a steep-sided arroyo, then back at her, focusing on her thin stature, her long black hair, and a no-frills outfit of jeans and a checkered blue and red man's shirt.

"My father's been studying the art of sandpainting. I'm afraid a recent ceremony may have been done incorrectly."

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"The woman he performed the sing for is very sick. He was doing the Monster Slayer, Nayenezgani. Do you know it?"

Like many modern Dine, Stillman was familiar with various sandpainting designs even though he had not been instructed in the craft. "He appears in the Female Shootingway, doesn't he?"

"Yes, except in this painting Nayenezgani was Holy Man, Changing Woman's Child and also her grandchild."

"And what happened?"

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"During the ceremony, the garland of arrows was partially erased."

When a sandpainting was created, the opening or entrance faced east, from where the Dine believed evil could not easily enter. To protect the other three sides from evil, the medicine man made a continuous design to encircle the southern, western, and northern sides. Great care was taken to perform details correctly because according to Dine belief, the universe was delicately balanced and to upset the balance, even unintentionally, meant some type of disaster would result.

"My father was terribly upset."

Stillman did not understand what he could do about the situation. This was a spiritual, not a police matter. "Has your father seen a medicine man?"

"He's afraid to travel to see one. Afraid he won't survive the trip."

"So what is it you want?"

"He needs special protection. Could you drive him to Sheep Springs? Protect him?"

The Chinle Police Department faced the Twin Creek Treatment Center, the Transportation Department, the Fish & Wildlife sub-office, and the Chinle Independence School with its Family Literacy Center and Community Library. Up the road stood the newly built home of JOBS. Stillman parked his truck beside the Lieutenant's shiny black truck and went inside, stopping first to consult a candy machine before he made his way to his boss's office.

Lieutenant Wolcott sat in a windowless cubicle beneath a huge mandala made of lamb's wool, rabbit skin, and suede. He was a lanky man with wrinkled, leathery skin that made him appear older than his fifty-nine years. A few summers shy of retirement, he was making up for a life of hard drinking by trying to insure his health against debilitating ageing. He wore braces on his teeth and was drinking his way through a daily gallon of milk and a bowl of vitamins.

"Someone steal a case of textbooks?" the lieutenant asked with a laugh as Stillman sat in an adjacent chair and proceeded to unwrap a Snickers candy bar.

"The vandalism didn't occur at the school," Stillman said, and explained the problem.

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"I'm surprised. Foster's done a handful of successful sings. People speak quite highly of him."

"You know him?"

"Not personally, but I hear his name mentioned every now and then at church. They call for him when they think the old ways might work better than the new."

"I was thinking I'd finish the few reports on my desk before we go."

"You'll have to save your trip until you run down some particulars on a man at the hospital. Tour guide spotted him at Tsegi. Looks like a suicide."

"Any ID on him?"

Jack Wolcott shook his head. "Clothes appear to have been changed. Trousers're too short, shirt cuffs don't meet the wrists."

"May be my pilot."

"Could be," Wolcott said cautiously, in a tone that said they had enough robberies, stabbings, and traffic accidents without crossing the line onto FBI turf. "Why don't you see if you can identify him? If it's him, we'll turn our information over."

Stillman finished his candy bar. "There were artifacts in the plane, and there aren't any now."

The lieutenant tossed a handful of tablets into his mouth and chased them down with several gulps of milk. "Where d'you think they came from?"

"They looked to be Anasazi. They were red, black, and white with corrugated coils around the necks."

"Those wouldn't have been Anasazi. The natural clays of Mesa Verde couldn't produce red color. Black, yes; white, yes."

"But then why injure a pilot over a bunch of pottery if the stuff isn't the real thing?"

Lieutenant Wolcott swallowed the remaining vitamins and milk and wiped the resulting white moustache with his sleeve. "Maybe because the pilot knew where the stuff was made."

Before he left, Stillman called major trading posts in the Four Corners to learn whether any pottery matching the ones he'd seen in the plane had been brought in in the last two days. None had, but he left his number for concession owners to contact him if they received any with red markings.

At the clinic in Chinle the attending physician showed Stillman his pilot on a stretcher. He gently brushed the man's hair from his forehead. The man was young. Except for his clothing and the fact

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that his shoes were put on the wrong feet, the pilot looked like a dispirited, broken Navajo who, despite laws forbidding alcohol on the reservation, reeked of cheap wine.

Stillman listened to the night sounds of the desert. The crickets, the wind. The distant howl of a coyote. He lit a cigarette, watched the glowing end in the dark, and thought of his injured pilot and the man who could have wanted to hurt him. It wasn't Stillman's problem any longer but he couldn't stop thinking about the man. Whoever had assaulted him had flown with him or prepared to meet him.

The killer knew something about Dine superstition: He'd reversed the shoes on the feet to confuse any *chindi* that might follow the spirit in its journey from the dead body. Could be the killer was Dine. Or someone who wanted to appear Dine.

Stillman took a long drag on his cigarette and thought about the teacher's father, Edsitty Foster. Where was old man Foster sleeping these days? Certainly not inside his hogan where evil spirits had been unleashed. Probably outside, vulnerable to sudden chill winds.

Tomorrow he would take Gladys a sleeping bag for her father. Stillman finished his cigarette and squashed it out in the ceramic ashtray beside his kerosene lamp.

Word was the FBI had grudgingly provided a report consistent with a finding of murder. Stillman resented the politics surrounding reservation murders. The bias was nothing new, and in this case the physical evidence unfortunately did not conclusively prove that it could not have been suicide. But there was no gun. The man had been moved. It was true shooting victims often did not demonstrate reliable or consistent behavior, but a badly wounded person did not bury a weapon, lose several boxes of artifacts, and then walk miles before collapsing.

The feds said the Cessna was registered to a man named Dibe Dayijeehi, or Little Antelope, from Two Grey Hills outside of Sheep Springs. They speculated he had been killed for the artifacts he'd flown in. Because Dayijeehi had no living relatives or next of kin, he would receive a simple burial and that would be that.

It wasn't enough for Stillman. History had buried thousands of Dine Indians without properly honoring them. It struck him as a kind of arrogance to wrap up a case with the simplest explanation.

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For Stillman every Indian's life was consequential and deserved a genuine investigation.

An hour's worth of phone calls told Stillman Little Antelope did stunt flying after he returned from Vietnam and was something of a renegade pilot, taking secret trips off the Navajo Nation north to the Canyonlands in Utah and south across the Mexican border, reportedly to gather large quantities of red rocks from which sandpainters in Sheep Springs would grind their sand. Most of Little Antelope's renowned customers traded at Bud Garcia's.

Stillman nodded to an old man who stood on the porch of Garcia's trading post smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. Inside, at the checkout counter, an elderly woman used her thumbprint as an official signature for credit for her groceries. Stillman walked to the back of the trading post, where he found a stocky Bud Garcia weighing Navajo wool in exchange for a blanket, a bag of corn, oil, and five yards of blue cloth.

Stillman helped himself to an open can of tobacco and rolled a cigarette while he waited for the ageing trader to finish the transaction.

"How's it going, Officer?" Bud asked when he was done. "Want a cassette movie? *Rocky V* is in."

"No, thanks. Not a *Rocky V* fan."

The other man shrugged. "I do more business with VCRs than anything else. You can hook up the VCR to your truck battery."

Stillman lit the cigarette. "I thought you could tell me about some new Anasazi pottery."

"You want 'made in Japan'?" Bud gave a shy grin.

"Black, white, and red pots with coil necks."

"A flyer brought in two pots about a month ago, but I sold them."

"Did you get his name?"

"Nope. Strictly a cash transaction. I was promised more—this week actually—but I haven't received them yet."

"Thanks," Stillman said, disappointed. "Do you remember what he looked like?"

"He was Dine, thin, but no one I'm familiar with."

"You wouldn't know anyone I could talk to?"

He considered, then led Stillman through a low door into a room crammed full of rugs, handmade baskets, kachina dolls, and shelves of bound books. He lifted up rug after rug until he found the one he was looking for. On top of a cedar chest he laid a grey and white rug with images of coil pottery. Black, white, and red jugs with corrugated necks.

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"Who's the weaver?" Stillman asked.

"Lina Little at Round Rock, but you won't find her there. She's at the clinic at Chinle under observation for fever."

Stillman sipped tea from his thermos and reflected on the earth, its pigments, and art. The sun dipped below the horizon. Bluish shadows stemmed from coral cliffs. Distant buttes took on a purple tinge and their flanks deepened to carmine.

Over the years he'd heard a dozen stories, if he'd heard one, of phony archaeological findings, anachronistic petroglyphs, and kivas made of stone and clay matter that did not exist within a hundred-mile radius of the area where the Anasazi had lived.

Lina Little had struggled with her fever to tell him the pottery she had woven rugs of was real. Dibe Dayijeehi had flown it in from somewhere south of Agua Prieta in Sonora State in Mexico. But the pottery was stolen, she told him, taken probably from ceremonial kivas where *chindi* roamed, because since she had woven the rugs she had become very ill. These were strong *chindi,* she told him in a raspy voice. Even the singer she had sought had been interrupted, was unable to finish the ceremony, and had himself become ill.

The touch of her cool, clammy hand told him she was dying, as did the blisters of sweat sliding down her face. When she reached for his shirt with her feeble grasp and pulled him down toward her, Stillman thought he could smell the dank odor of death.

Sunlight filtered down through the smoke hole in the ceiling. Edsitty Foster sat cross-legged on top of a completed sandpainting. Above him, a spritely medicine man chanted in Navajo, bent to touch a figure in the sandpainting, and then moved to touch Edsitty Foster. Mentally Stillman translated the words.

> The world before me is blessed in balance
> The world behind me is blessed in balance
> The world above me is blessed in balance
> The world below me is blessed in balance
> All things around me are blessed in balance.

The medicine man bent to touch another figure in the sandpainting and then sprang forward to touch Foster again, transferring the healing from the painting to him. Stillman watched as before him Edsitty Foster regained his health. These age-old ceremonial remedies with their meticulous applications never ceased to amaze

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Stillman. As the three-day-long ritual came to an end, the medicine man erased the sandpainting with a sacred feather, sweeping the sand onto a blanket to carry outside, where he would mix it carefully with the dirt.

The spirits of the dead could not hurt Foster now.

Stillman was certain the plane's destination at Kayenta was planned. The pilot was probably bringing the artifacts to someone close-by. Not to sell at trading posts, but more likely to confirm their value. The only archaeologist in this part of the Four Corners lived at Monument Valley, three miles north of Kayenta.

Nakai, unusually tall for a Dine and too tall for the low ceiling in his kitchen, hunched over to grind fresh coffee and pour it through a filter. Stillman waited until the coffee and fruit were placed on the table before he told him about Little Antelope.

Nakai listened, sipping his coffee. "Several weeks ago a man contacted me about unusual Anasazi pottery. He promised them on his next trip, but I neither met him nor saw the pottery."

"Why?"

"He never showed." Nakai picked up a beige stone which bore the design of an orange horse on one side.

"What was his name?"

"I was told to expect a Mr. Smith, but obviously that couldn't be his real name." His voice was light, with the singsong quality of reservation-born Dine. "If the property were stolen, he'd be smart to use a false name."

Stillman told him about Edsitty Foster and Lina Little. Nakai continued to turn over the stone, furrowing his brow in such deep concentration that the crease between his eyes pulsated. Stillman waited, watching him turn the stone, revealing its blank side, then its orange figure, and again the blank side in unhurried rotations.

"Interesting," Nakai said, lightly tapping the edge of the stone on the table. "If you or I had evidence of this pottery we could rewrite history, because a discovery of Anasazi artifacts from Mexico would mean the Anasazi had neither disappeared nor been conquered but had simply wandered, or migrated, south."

Such a discovery meant whoever possessed the pottery was sitting on a gold mine worth millions of dollars. But then, why hadn't any attempts at selling it been made?

This time when Stillman labored up the steps of the school at Din-

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nehotso his thoughts were heavy. He had managed to overlook the cultural tags that set a medicine man apart from other Dines. Just as a practiced medicine man spent days preparing the cure, so Edsitty Foster would have concentrated on every detail, from cleaning his hogan and grinding his sand by hand, to measuring the precise amount of color necessary for his sandpainting design and inviting his guests. Every detail, every plant, every song, every prayer—this was the Dine way, to do the sings together with sandpaintings on the earth floor, the sand later to be swept into the earth itself to prevent knowledge from being hoarded.

One detail had been overlooked. One enormous oversight had brought disaster into the Foster hogan.

Edsitty Foster must have felt enormous shame.

Stillman waited uneasily in the anteroom for Gladys Foster. When he saw her, he wished he were anywhere else but here. When she smiled broadly for him, he felt worse.

"How is your father?" he asked her.

"The healing helped."

There was no way to put what he had to say delicately. "But your father didn't need protection from a police officer."

"Having you there made him feel better," she said, evading eye contact.

"Where's your brother?"

"Sam? Dad sent him away," she replied.

"Because your brother got nervous during the ceremony? Because when Lina Little told your father the pottery was stolen, your brother disrupted the ceremony and in his haste to gather the pots he erased the garland?"

Gladys stared at the floor.

"You can't go on protecting him, Gladys. Your brother has killed a man. Tell me where he is. Please."

Through the trees came the damp breeze of Chinle Wash. Stillman made his way down the embankment to the shallow water glistening like a rich tan snake on the sand. He tracked the wash upstream, gently testing the adobe mud for pockets of quicksand, stepping back when his walking stick seemed to sink too fast.

He climbed onto a sandbar where Canyon de Chelly met Canyon del Muerto and gazed at the sand. At the lizard tracks that disappeared beneath shrubs. Then at hand and toe indentations treaded by ancient feet to reach Junction Ruin nestled in a cave a hundred

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feet above the canyon floor. He gazed, too, at cloud shadows on the four-hundred-foot-high, red slickrock walls. And beyond, at the sky, a commotion of light and dark.

Here historic time lived in ruins. Petroglyphs portrayed a force of Spaniards led by Narbona against the Dine. Pictographs on cave walls told of Dine ancestors who resisted raids by the Utes, Paiutes, Apaches, Comanches, and Kiowas, but who were finally burned and starved by Carson into submission.

This was Dinetah, Stillman thought. Homeland of his people. A sacred land, being proudly rebuilt into a strong nation.

It was also land ransacked from within and without by curio seekers hoping for a quick fortune.

Stillman followed the bend. Halfway into the stream, cut at the knees, was the body of a man caught in quicksand. Tan water divided around him as though around a delta. The man's arms and legs were covered by sand, but his face stared at the elusive archaeological treasures, broken fragments of white, black, and red corrugated pots scattered about in the water, in the sand, on the grass. Up ahead, less than several hundred yards, beneath the open sky, sat the Fosters' summer hogan.

Stillman rolled the man's head to one side. To be so close and at the same time so far away from a stolen dream. The dark face pleaded with him. Stillman positioned himself on a stretch of grass and tugged at the man, coaxing the body toward him, grabbing hold of the man's arms, then chest, every few minutes renegotiating his own tenuous position until, an hour or so later, he pulled the man free.

The sun fell behind the patina-streaked canyon walls. Wisps of cotton danced in a breeze over the scintillating water. The salmon-colored slickrock breathed its last glow. Shadows leapt like bighorn sheep out of hiding. From the corner of his eye Stillman saw sherds floating free on the current. He should claim the pottery pieces for the Navajo Nation but knew he wouldn't risk the pockets of quicksand to do it. As history floated beneath the vigilant Junction Ruin, he thought about how to tell Gladys he had her brother in custody.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The prayer the medicine man chanted for Edsitty Foster actually reads "in beauty" rather than "in balance" and can be found in the "Night Way" prayer.

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The stories of Londoner Tony Wilmot have appeared in a wide variety of British publications and several have been adapted for BBC television. Through translation, his fiction has also traveled to Japan, Sweden, Germany, France, and Holland. The following story is his first piece for EQMM; *it was originally published in Britain in 1985. . . .*

SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD

by TONY WILMOT

He was watching the park gates from his usual bench by the pond. The girl would soon be joining him for her midday break.

For several days now they had been sitting at the same bench and exchanged pleasantries after she had laughed at the way the ducks fought over the crusts he had thrown to them.

She was twentyish, attractive, with a pulse-quickening figure, but he didn't flatter himself that her interest was in any way sexual. He subscribed to the adage, "No fool like an old fool." Besides, he was more than twice her age.

To him, it was a harmless flirtation—a fillip to his middle-aged man's morale—and he had found himself looking forward to their lunchtime "assignations."

Earlier that morning, however, events had taken a more serious turn. She had paid a visit to the vehicle registration department in the town hall.

His secretary had come into his office. "There's a young lady here, Mr. Smythe, asking if we keep records of car ownership . . . MG sports cars in particular. I said I thought not."

He had felt a twinge of unease at the mention of the car type.

"Quite so," he'd replied. "Tell her registrations are all on the national computer now. In any case, we couldn't give out that kind of information."

He had peered at the reception desk through his office's glass partition. The enquirer was the girl from the park bench. An odd

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coincidence, he'd thought. Or was it something more?

Now, as she entered the park gates with that long stride and purposeful expression, his unease returned.

"Hello—we meet again," she said, sitting beside him.

"Ah, yes . . . sky looks a bit overcast. Hope we aren't in for some rain." He gestured at the apple she was peeling with a penknife. "Lunch?"

"Yes, worse luck. I'm on a diet."

He smiled. "You seem to be here most days. Do you work hereabouts?"

"Oh no. In fact, I don't live here. I'm just staying in town while I'm doing some research. I'm from Elmston, actually."

"Really? I know Elmston . . ." he began. The words were out before the warning bell rang. "Well, I don't exactly know it . . . pal of mine . . . knew him years ago . . . used to live there. Is this your first visit here?"

"Yes."

"Nice place," he said. "Bit dull, though."

"Not at all. It's charming."

"What are you researching? Our town's chequered history, perhaps. Parts date from the Roman occupation."

"How interesting. But no—I'm trying to trace someone."

"Ah! Bit of detective work?"

She smiled. "In a way. I'm beginning to find out what a job it is tracing someone who may not want to be traced. No wonder the police have to spend so much time on investigations."

"And the 'trail' has led from Elmston to here?"

"Indirectly, yes. But I've had to spend time in several places first. I'm hoping this will be the last."

"Sounds very intriguing," he said, hoping to entice her to reveal more without seeming to be prying into her private life.

"I suppose it is, in a way. I'm going back more than twenty years, though." She made a wry face. "Which is setting myself a difficult task."

"I don't suppose you were even born then?" he said.

"I was—just! Anyway, I've managed to unearth a few clues. The person I'm looking for had an MG sports car then and got married during the same period. I know it's a bit of a long shot but it might just pay off."

His unease became a shiver which set him on edge even more. He was like the rabbit hypnotised by the snake, wanting to get away

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but unable to move. "But I mustn't bore you with my personal affairs," she went on. "What about you? What line of business are you in?"

"Oh, nothing much. Civil servant, actually. Quite dull, I'm afraid. I wish I could be a double-oh-seven like you but . . . I'm just a nine-to-five chap."

"Don't be so modest. There's nothing wrong with being a civil servant."

He made a deprecating gesture but inwardly he was thrilled that a pretty girl was finding him interesting enough to want to flirt with him.

"Married, of course?"

He was on the point of saying no when he noticed her glance at the ring on his left hand. He nodded.

"The dishy men always are! Lived here long, have you?"

He didn't like the turn the conversation was taking. "Oh, quite some time." He made a show of checking his wristwatch. "Well, I must be getting back. The grindstone waits for no man! I, er . . . that is, perhaps we might see each other again tomorrow?"

"Yes, let's. About one o'clock?"

He said that would be fine.

As he walked back to the town hall, doubts and fears scurried around his head like cornered rats. It was just too damned close to be coincidence anymore. For *he* used to run an MG. And *he* had married twenty years ago.

He couldn't concentrate at the office. An hour before finishing time, he got his car from the staff car park and drove to his semi in a leafy suburb on the outskirts of town.

Margaret, his wife, was doing some work in the garden. "Robert, is that you? You're early. Nothing wrong at the office, is there?"

"No, of course not." Why did women always think the worst? "I thought I'd finish off that lampstand in the shed while there's still some daylight."

"Right-o! I'll call you when dinner's ready."

He put the inside catch on the shed door and made sure his wife was still in the front garden. Then he got a metal box from behind his workbench.

The key to the box was hidden under a bottle of weedkiller. Inside the box were two yellowing clippings from the *Elmston Observer*.

One was headlined: Girl, 10, Killed in Hit-and-run.

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For the umpteenth time he read how the girl had been knocked down on a zebra crossing while on her way home from a schoolfriend's house.

The details were embedded in his memory. He had driven over to Margaret's parents' house in the MG that evening. They had lived just outside Elmston then.

Because of some road works, the traffic had been diverted.

He had been exceeding the speed limit, too. It was an unfamiliar route and the crossing had taken him by surprise.

The car's brakes were slack because he'd skipped a service to save money—and a shower had made the road surface slippery . . .

Even though it was twenty years ago, he could still remember the sickening thud . . . the scream . . . the crumpled body on the side of the road.

Of course he should have stopped, but he'd panicked. He'd been short-listed for a new job for which a clean driving licence was a condition of employment, and he had been only days away from his wedding. Reporting the accident would have ruined everything.

The second clipping, headed "Police Appeal for Witnesses," said several people had heard the screech of brakes but none had seen the accident.

A police spokesman was quoted as saying they were "pursuing several lines of enquiry."

He locked the clippings away again and returned the box to its hiding place. He had never fully understood why he had kept them all these years. What, he wondered, would the psychologists make of that? A guilt complex, perhaps? A subconscious desire to punish himself for his crime?

It was his favourite tuna-fish salad for dinner, but the memory of the accident had dulled his appetite. He pecked away at it, nodding absently as Margaret related the events of her day.

All through the meal the thought kept hammering in his brain: How long before the girl found out that *he* was the hit-and-run driver?

More than likely she was a former schoolfriend wanting to see justice done. Or a relative . . . the dead girl's sister even.

The police enquiries had no doubt fizzled out years ago—they would have had far more pressing cases on their plate—but the little girl's family and friends wouldn't have given up the search.

That night he hardly slept. At the office next day he clockwatched until it was time to go to the park. The girl was there when he arrived.

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"I was hoping I'd see you today," she said. "You see, I'm certain I've come to the right town. You know I mentioned an MG . . . well, how's this for amateur sleuthing? . . . There's the car's number."

A muscle in his cheek began to twitch rapidly as he read what was on her notebook. *His* MG's number. But how had she . . . ? The newspaper report said there had been no eyewitnesses.

"I'm missing the middle one or two digits in the number-plate—but it's enough."

"Very cloak and daggerish," he said, forcing a smile. "Have you tried the local Vehicle Registration Department? Perhaps they can help."

"Oh yes. No luck, though. But guess what—I've got a photograph of the car."

The park seemed to spin. He gripped the bench with both hands.

"You all right?" she asked.

"What? Oh yes. Just a twinge of indigestion."

"Well, I haven't actually got the photograph," she went on. "I've only seen the negative. I'm having a ten-by-eight print done from it."

"You have been busy!" His voice sounded unreal. "Look, that friend of mine from Elmston. I've just remembered. *He* had an MG. He could be the one you're looking for. . . . I might still have an address for him at home. . . .

"Have you got a phone number where I can contact you? Better still, an address in case I miss you here tomorrow."

She wrote down both in her notebook and tore the page out for him. "Now I must be off," she said. "I've got more sleuthing to do. I'll look out for you here again tomorrow."

He gave her a minute or two's start, then began to follow her.

Her first stop was at a photographic shop near the main square. She came out carrying a large buff-coloured envelope.

That would be the MG print, he thought as he observed her getting her bearings.

He kept about fifty yards behind as she crossed the town centre to the offices of the *Evening Gazette*.

He followed her through the revolving doors, keeping the public newspaper stands in the foyer between himself and the point where she was talking at the enquiry counter.

Pretending to leaf through the week's back numbers, he could hear snatches of conversation above the din of typewriters and telephones.

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". . . wedding report twenty years ago . . . would it be possible to . . ."

". . . archives are on the fourth floor . . . first door on the right as you come out of the lift . . ."

He watched the girl take the lift. Time passed. People came and went. He felt clammy and conspicuous.

Eventually she reappeared out of the lift. The receptionist smiled. Had she found what she'd been looking for?

Yes, she had.

He was in a cold sweat now, but he had no difficulty keeping her in sight, for he knew the town like the back of his hand. Where would she head next? Oh God, he thought, don't let it be the police station.

"Robert! Long time no see!" He started. It was a man he knew from the parks department. He felt like a schoolboy caught playing truant. "Stretching your legs, eh, Robert?"

"Oh, er, yes." He could see the girl disappearing down a side turning. "Popped out for cigarettes."

The man grinned. "Some looker, eh?"

"What?"

"That girl you were staring at."

"Oh." He forced a smile. "Look, can't stop now. Let's have a drink next week. I'll ring you."

When he finally got away, the girl was nowhere to be seen. He spent the rest of the afternoon fretting at his desk. Whose wedding had she looked up? And why?

It wasn't until he and Margaret were watching TV that evening that the answer came to him; in fact, it was staring him in the face . . .

On the piano was an ornately framed picture of him and Margaret on their wedding day. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? The other photos in the family album: *There was one of the MG.*

He found the album and flicked through it. There it was—the pair of them snapped in the MG as they were leaving the reception to go off on their honeymoon.

He stared at himself from twenty years ago: thin face, unlined, thick curling hair. Now he had a double chin, was balding, wore a moustache and bifocals. Unrecognisable!

On the back of the MG was a "Just Married" placard which obscured the middle two digits on the rear number-plate.

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The girl must have gone to every photographer in the district until she found the one who had taken their wedding pictures. The negatives would have been on file, probably in a storeroom.

The girl had got a print. Then she had searched the *Evening Gazette*'s back issues for the paper's own picture of the same couple in the MG . . . which would tell her the names and parents' addresses.

And there the search would stop, for Margaret's parents had emigrated long ago and his own parents were dead. He was ex-directory in the local telephone book, so he was safe.

Then it struck him like a blow. "The electoral roll," he said out loud. "She simply goes through it, street by street, until she finds my name . . ."

"Did you say something, Robert?" Margaret called.

"What? No, nothing."

It would be only a matter of time now before his skeleton was out of its cupboard. He'd be branded a child-killer, all the more heinous because he had covered his tracks (he'd sold the MG immediately they had got back from their honeymoon).

He'd get at least five years for manslaughter. He'd lose his job; his reputation would be ruined; everything he'd built up over the years . . . down the drain!

He knew he hadn't got the strength of character to begin all over again; he was too set in his ways. . . .

"I think I'll go to The Swan for a pint, love. Don't wait up. I might be late."

"Oh, all right. I'll leave something out for your supper."

At times like this, he mused, it was positively an advantage having a conventionally predictable spouse.

It was a fifteen-minute drive to the block of service flats where the girl was staying; hers was on the ground floor.

She came to the door in a dressing-gown with a towel wrapped round her hair.

He was sorry to barge in on her unannounced, he blurted; but he'd found himself in the neighbourhood, so he'd thought he'd give her that information about his friend.

"Oh, well, come in. You'll have to forgive my appearance—I'm in the middle of washing my hair. Can I get you a drink?"

"I won't, thanks—I'm driving."

"Ah yes . . . the old Breathalyzer!"

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He tried to smile but couldn't move his face muscles. "That friend," he began, swallowing. "His name's . . . Smythe . . . Robert Smythe."

"That's it," she cried. "The same one I've been looking for! I found his address this afternoon, in the electoral roll at the town hall."

So it was true, he thought; she was tracking him down.

"Perhaps I will have that drink," he said, slipping a hand into his jacket pocket.

She was at the drinks cabinet, her back to him. "Gin and tonic all right?"

"Fine." He pulled out a length of cord. It went round her neck so easily. He didn't make a sound as he pulled it tight. Nor did she . . .

At the breakfast table next morning, Margaret thought Robert looked pale and drawn; there were dark rings round his eyes and he seemed unusually preoccupied. Clearly he needed a holiday; he was working far too hard at that office.

She knew it probably wouldn't be much good urging him to take the day off but she decided to try; and, to her surprise, he agreed.

"I do have a bit of a migraine, love," he said.

"The rest will do you good. I'll ring the office and tell them you're not well."

The *plop* on the mat inside the front door told her the post had arrived. "I'll go," she said.

Two letters. One was Robert's bank statement, the other was for her. An unfamiliar handwriting.

She tore it open on her way back to the kitchen. It was a three-page letter, with a snapshot. The sudden shock, as she began to read, made her giddy.

". . . all I had to go on was your maiden name . . . you'd be surprised how many Margarets with that surname have got married since I was born . . . it meant checking each one to find if it was the right Margaret . . ."

She stared at the attractive, fair-haired girl in the snap. Could it be . . . after all these years? It was something she had buried in her memory, something she had thought would remain buried; but, deep down, hadn't she always known she would never be able to escape from her past?

". . . when I first learned the truth about myself, I was hurt and angry . . . but now that I'm grown up myself, I'm able to understand why you did what you did . . ."

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She sat at the table and rested her hands on the scrubbed pine to stop them from trembling. She glanced at Robert but he seemed unaware of her agitation.

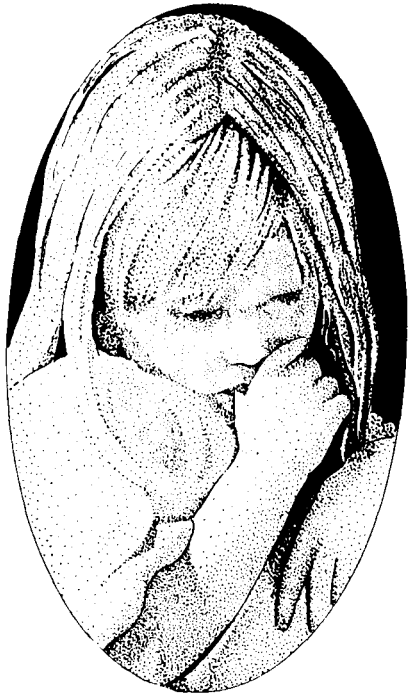
". . . finally traced you through your marriage to Robert Smythe . . . and now I feel I must meet you . . . of course, my adoptive parents will always be 'Mum' and 'Dad' to me but . . ."

Blinking back the tears, she heard Robert asking if the letter was bad news.

"Bad? Oh no . . ." Quite the contrary, she thought. But how would her husband take it?

The guilt she had borne all those years suddenly overwhelmed her and she pushed the snapshot across the table.

"Robert, I don't quite know how to . . . there's something I've got to tell you . . . something that happened before I met you . . ."



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Freelance editor and writer Claire Caterer hails from Rego Park, New York. For her first paid fiction publication she has created a police detective with a modern voice and placed him in a traditional "cozy," complete with a full cast of characters, clues, and small-town ambiance . . .

DEATH ON THE REACH

by CLAIRE M. CATERER

A fellow like me stumbles on dead bodies with some regularity; that I will grant you. Comes with the job and I'm not complaining. That doesn't make it any more enjoyable. Oh, there have been some routine ones—old Mrs. Rayburn at the foot of her oak tree, for instance; we all knew she'd fall out of that thing one of these days—or Sam Eaton choking to death on a peach pit; that man never was careful with his fruit. But if there was ever a body I regretted finding, it was that of Gardiner Mallone, face up, mouth open, flat on his back in his velour smoking jacket on his king-size bed, which was, otherwise, nicely made up with hospital corners. Not a pin out of place—even the hole in his forehead as even and clean as you'd find anywhere. Pity to say that almost before I told myself, He's dead!, I thought, damned if the job wasn't neat. About the neatest I'd ever seen.

If I hadn't seen more than my share, being the sheriff of Garth's Reach, then maybe I'd not have such a cause to talk.

The Reach, naturally, is the water, not the island, but some Puritan back in seventeen-something got the idea that he'd make life simpler for himself by calling the two the same damned thing. Garth's is pretty enough, like all these New England islands—it's got the reefs, the reeds, the saltbox houses—but it's anything but peaceful. It's the out-of-towners, islanders will tell you, that make

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it such a deathtrap. They're always dragging their problems into their vacations where they don't belong, and that's why the place reeks of crime every summer. The locals are sure the summer folks will keep all their trouble to themselves, so they're not afraid to walk the beach after ten or venture out to the boathouse when the fog's too thick to spit through. But I know, because I see it every year: This place is full of death, summer folks or no summer folks.

I ended up being sorry I found Gardiner Mallone, but I can't say I got all choked up over his passing. Little New York bastard made all his money in real estate—city real estate, not even the country stuff, which because it's pretty makes it seem kind of genteel-like. He had his fingers in five or six city pies full of dissatisfied tenants. I never saw them, naturally—I don't leave this island except to go into Boston for my favorite tobacco—but I read the papers same as anybody. Man buys firetraps and roach motels and then decides it's nice and cheap to keep them that way. Hell, I wasn't the only one not sniffling over this.

Mrs. Mallone herself didn't seem too broken up about it, which didn't look quite right, even given the S.O.B. he was. She'd been on a bike ride up to the lighthouse, and when she came back all sweaty and flushed and saw my car out front, she came in slow to the bedroom and stopped at the door, taking it all in at once: me, Mr. Mallone's still and gaping mouth, the neat clean hole, Hodges the coroner. And then she looked at each one of us again, just to get it straight, and then finally at me a third time, and crumpled right there. Not fainted, exactly; I took note of that. Just a slow kind of collapse, like a piece of newspaper crinkling up in a flame. Hodges was right there to catch her—always a gentlemanly type, though I think it was as much Mrs. Mallone's red hair and terry-cloth shorts he was concerned with. Not that I'm any judge.

"You don't think it was me," she said to me when the crumpling was done with and the body got rid of and the coffee on the stove. I never had sat in their kitchen before. This was one saltbox that looked more like a salt mansion. The coffeepot perked on one of two stoves, one at each end of a kitchen that was about the size of my whole shack. I stretched out on one plushy chair and propped my bum leg on another. Vivian Mallone cocked one eye at my foot on her chair and handed me a cup. I took the coffee and she smiled at me, one of those polite kind of thin-lipped you-think-I'm-a-killer smiles. As I said, I've seen it before.

"No weapon on the premises," I told her. "That's in your favor."

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"Certainly more than that is in my favor, Sheriff." She had changed to a velvet dressing gown and her red hair sat kind of nice against the black lapels, and her being that New York kind of thin—well, she was distracting.

"A spouse is the primary suspect in such cases," I said.

"But I was out riding. You saw me come in."

"Anybody see you out riding? You stop anywhere for a tonic?"

She smiled. "A soda? No."

"Mind you, I'm not saying one way or the other." I was trying to be delicate. "But the motive's there. You stand to make out pretty nice."

"You mean this?" She waved a long-fingered hand around the kitchen, by which I took it she meant the whole house. "I've got money of my own, Sheriff. I don't need Gardiner's."

"For some people, there's never enough."

"I'm not some people." She poured the coffee out. "For someone of my means, I live quite modestly. I keep the Manhattan apartment on East Seventy-fifth Street—oh, I know, Sheriff, it sounds lavish, but I assure you, it isn't—and the house here on Garth's. Occasionally we rent a place in East Hampton, if the weather is too cold in New England. The beaches, you know." She shivered.

"That apartment—that's yours, you say?"

"You knew Gardiner, didn't you?"

"Can't say that I did, ma'am."

She gave a little laugh, like a cough. "Well, Sheriff, even to see him around, to meet him in the checkout of Burke & Burke, or just wherever, you could tell—the East Side was no place for Gardiner. No, for him it was Central Park West or nothing." When she took a drink of the coffee, her upper lip curled up like a clam. "He was awfully trendy."

"Are you saying you didn't live together?"

"Oh, not at all. We *lived* together. But I always kept another apartment for—well, special occasions of one kind or another. I'd had it before we were married, you see, and it was very dear to me. I couldn't just give it up." She sucked air in through her teeth. "Gardiner couldn't stand that."

I couldn't stand much more of Vivian Mallone, red hair or no. I let her be, in her grief, I told her, though I didn't think there was much of that. I told her she wasn't to leave Garth's Reach for a while, not till we'd given this one a good run for its money. She just

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upped her eyebrows at me and told me she wasn't planning on going anywhere just yet.

Call it sheriff's intuition, if you like, but I can sniff them out just like a bloodhound. That bicycle alibi didn't impress me much, and while I turned the whole thing around in my head I kept seeing her upper lip curl up—the way it might if a snake had slithered over her. Mrs. Mallone wasn't just not mourning—she was downright relieved he was gone.

But I'd never let anybody say MacReady wasn't fair and thorough, instincts or no. I did my asking around. "Yeah," Lloyd Henderson told me, "I seen her bike up my way round ten this morning. She come zooming by like a speedboat. Pedaling not like to get somewhere"—he nodded in that dumb way he has when he thinks he's got one of my crimes licked—"but like she was running *away* from somewhere."

"Don't blow it up past all recognition," I said to him.

I gazed back out to the road. He was halfway up the hill to the lighthouse, set back from the road a good fifty yards among the reeds. His eyes are not what they once were, and he was sitting out on his porch with the paper. Did he really know who he was looking at?

"I know," he snapped at me. "You know anybody else with that red hair? And I'll tell you something else I saw: She had on those little fluffy tennis shorts. Blue. I only noticed her 'cause she shouted out to me while she was going by and waved, real cheery like. So I waved back."

Even the bike he had down to a T. Well, he'd seen her, of that I was convinced. I walked out to the car and looked down the road. Had to be a mile from her house to his. She would've had to leave her place no later than nine-thirty, and Hodges said Mallone was killed around eleven, not half an hour before we found him. I began to think this wouldn't be as easy as I'd thought.

I don't, as a rule, let Riley come with me when I look into the scene of a crime. I tell him someone's got to look after the office, which is the truth, but Hillary's there to watch the place, and maybe a sheriff should be taking his chief deputy along on such things. Still, I like to be by myself with a case for a while, without some loudmouth telling me what's what.

Like it or not, Riley always shows up eventually, though.

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"I'll tell you what it is, Mac," he said to me the afternoon of the Mallone murder. He slurped down his cup of coffee in two gulps and scratched one fingernail across his black eyebrows. "She kills the guy, right? Then she gets in her car, stashes the bike in there, and *drives* up to the lighthouse. Then she bikes round the other way, and bikes right by Lloyd, waves at him so he sees her, then—"

"Hang on there. Sit down, can't you?" That's the thing with Riley. Just like a big dumb lab, he can't sit still, always running up to you with his tongue hanging out. "She didn't drive anything. For one thing, the car was sitting right there in the drive when I went in. She came in a few minutes later, on the bike. Besides—" I paused a sec, trying to light my pipe. I keep thinking it'll make me look more classy, but I spend all my time cleaning and tamping the damned thing. "No place to park a car up on that road. No." The tobacco flared a little. "She biked back from the lighthouse, all right."

Riley deflated into his desk chair. "Guess there's more than a few people who'd like to see Gardiner Mallone in a box."

Maybe there were, but nobody more than Vivian, was my guess. And I still had a few cards to play. I suspected something that even my little *Dragnet* deputy Riley didn't know.

When I came by the next day she was making a show of being a naturalist—actually out there in the dirt in gloves and denims and her hair in a scarf, troweling up some flowers with quick, vicious little stabs. She wore the same pointy sunglasses I remembered from the bike trip.

"Absolutely nothing grows in this salt air," she said as she yanked up her roses. "I don't know why I bother."

"You need something a little sturdier. Nasturtium. Sweet Alyssum. Maybe a bayberry bush."

She settled back on her haunches and looked at me. "Well, Sheriff. You're just a wealth of information, aren't you?"

"And I'm about to show off again, I'm afraid. It may be something you don't want to talk about. As you know, we're still working on leads in your husband's murder."

She plunged the trowel into the wet ground again. "Yes, I appreciate your hard work."

"I wonder if you know there's a few rumors going round about your—well—outside activities, if you will. You mentioned that other place you keep in New York."

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"I don't know how anyone in Garth's Reach would know anything about what I do or don't do in New York."

"Oh, you know people here. Funny how everybody seems to know lots of people on the mainland, you know? How everyone's got connections." I settled myself into one of her white iron lawn chairs. For something so expensive they were damned uncomfortable. "For instance, my deputy's brother works on Wall Street. Did I tell you that? And his boss happened to know your husband. So things, as they say, get around."

"What are you trying to say, Sheriff? What did you hear about Gardiner?"

I tried to lean forward, but the hip locked and I stayed where I was. "He knew you were having that fling, didn't he?"

Her face went white, which wasn't a bad picture next to the lipstick and the roses. I notice things like colors. "I don't think I understand," she said.

"Mind you, I'm not saying anything for it or against it. But I like to have all the facts laid out in front of me. You were having a fling and Mr. Mallone found out about it, isn't that right?"

"I won't try to pretend we had a perfect marriage, Gardiner and I," she said, picking the petals off one of the roses. "There was someone, and yes, Gardiner found out about him. A younger man, from my office. But I swear to you, that was all over months ago. You can check into it yourself. His name is Jeffrey Madigan."

She started breathing more normally when I pulled out my notebook and licked my pencil. "That was . . . ?"

"Jeff Madigan. But please, Sheriff, there's no reason to get him mixed up in this."

"You'd be better off telling me everything up front. Anything might have a bearing on things." I took down Madigan's number, too, but I didn't think I was going to use it. "Thanks ever so."

As I limped off the property, Mrs. Mallone dug her hands into the dirt. She ripped those roses out, roots and all, just like they were weeds. Apparently she didn't mind the thorns.

Of course, Riley's brother is a lobsterman up in Maine and to my knowledge has never set foot in New York City. But some folks have to be prodded to give up anything at all.

Even so, the Madigan lead was cold. No great businessman, her honey, and he'd been busted back down to office clerk awhile back. It was clear they weren't together anymore.

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"But what about Mallone, Mac?" Riley asked me over clam rolls.

"Well, what about him?"

"There's more than one islander says he hasn't been exactly faithful himself. Maybe he tried to break it off, you know, and somebody got a little angry. . . ."

"Nah." I squirted some vinegar on my potatoes. Damn but Riley gets under my skin sometimes. I'm usually up on all the local gossip. "I never heard that about Mallone. He was a bastard, all right, but he never got mixed up—not around here, anyway."

Riley leaned back and tightened his greasy ponytail. "I heard something else. You know the Murray family? She's the one."

"Who?"

"Jolene, obviously."

"You're out in left field, Riley. She's just a girl. And a local. She couldn't get mixed up with that character. Her dad used to be a volunteer deputy in the summer. Used to bring her in all the time."

"And when was that? Ten years ago? Fifteen? She's my age, Mac. You haven't seen her lately. She's at the club almost every night."

I grunted. *The club,* as Riley calls it, is just a cheap kind of disco with a big ball hanging from the ceiling and everybody pretending they're dancing to live music. If you can call it music. More trouble has come about since they slapped up that ugly thing than in all the years previous.

"Anyway, the local poop at the Starlight is that Jolene's bike's been seen in the Mallones' garage more than once. I got it from a reliable source."

I hate how Riley knows the younger crowd better than I do. "Well, maybe. I'll check it out." I scooped up my clam crumbs and threw them in the trash.

"Why can't I check it out?"

"You? You've got to stick close to the Starlight and make sure those kids stay out of trouble tonight. You're on duty there, remember? Not partying duty, either."

I wonder sometimes why Riley sticks around, but he seems not to mind being left behind. When I mentioned the Starlight, he grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Don't you worry, Mac. I can keep that crowd in line."

I drove up Seaside Way, the winding road on the east coast of the island—the main drag—all the way to Lighthouse Point. It's the only working lighthouse we have on Garth's Reach. Folks love to go

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up there and sit in the reeds, looking down on the sea. There are dangerous currents down there. We've lost a few kids to the undertow. It can pull you in when you're doing nothing but staring at it, those big craggy rocks throwing the sea every which way, the foam curling around the Point. No number of signs keep people from dipping their toes in. They're just going down to collect shells or rocks, they tell me, because the sea grows a pink rock like you'd never see on land—but somehow they get sucked out to the waves, and like as not you never see them again.

It's no fun walking up to the lighthouse, not even once you've gone as far as you can in a car. I parked on the upper reaches of the road, where it turns to sand, and trekked, slowly with my bum leg, up to the lighthouse and knocked.

Ian Crawford opened up. He almost never pokes his head out, except once in a blue moon to have a drink at the Seahorse Tavern down on the harbor. He's an old seaman, even beyond my years, with watery blue eyes and that way hermits have about them of not looking you quite in the eye. But he likes me.

"Come on in, Sheriff, have some coffee. Just made it. Enough for two."

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do."

His little kitchen's about all there is to his living quarters, except for the cot pushed in a dark alcove to the back. A gull screamed by as he poured. "Expecting any weather tonight?" I asked.

"Sure enough. Big fog's rolling in about eight o'clock, I think. Going to be a late night. Lots of pleasure boats going to be out. You know those people—they'll go out in any kind of weather, don't matter what you tell 'em." He hacked in disgust.

"Lights working?"

"Just had 'em checked." Ian chewed one side of his lip. "This a social call, Mac? I hope." Periodically I've had to consult Ian about some youngster who vanished off his coast.

"Not exactly." I pulled out a photo from my jacket pocket. "Have you seen this girl before?"

He peered closely at the photo for several minutes. It was a snapshot from the summer before of Jolene Murray, a young woman with big eyes and shiny black hair. Pretty, like they all seem to be nowadays.

"Sure," Ian said finally. "She's up here quite a bit. Bike rider. Local girl, ain't she?"

"Yeah, that's right."

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"She's not—?"

"No, no. She's fine. Her mom said she might be up here now."

"I saw her just about an hour ago, down on the beach. Her bike's there in the back of the lighthouse."

He took me around to where the bike lay in the sand, a beat-up Schwinn three-speeder girl's bike, almost all the green paint worn off it. "Saw her the other day, too," Crawford added.

"Do you remember when exactly?"

"Yesterday," he said at once. "That's right, 'cause that's the day Beverly found out she was gonna have Joshua's kid. Can you believe that? And her engaged to that nice doctor, too."

"Beverly?"

"Honest to gravy, Mac, don't you ever turn on the TV in that little office of yours? That's my favorite show. It was the first commercial break, and I looked out the window and saw Jolene walking down towards the beach. She looked back up the hill and waved at me, and she shouted out, 'How's Bev?' and I said, 'She's having a baby!' Then I went back to my show."

"What time would that have been?"

He scratched his chin. "Oh, let's see . . . show's on at eleven, the first break's about eleven-fifteen, I'd say."

I checked my notes. Mallone was dead by eleven. "You're sure that was Jolene?"

"Oh yeah. She had this big yellow sundress on. She wears it lots in the summer. And that black hair. She was a little ways off, but it was her, all right."

I wasn't about to argue with Ian Crawford. When he knows something for sure, he's usually right. I left the lighthouse and peered over the edge of the stairs. That yellow dress Ian talked about was pounding the beach like a sentry. I started down—had to be about sixty stairs. I knew going back would be a treat.

I was panting by the time I got there. Jolene was barefoot, skipping rocks out on the water when the waves didn't break over them.

"Hi there, Mac!" She ran right over and I realized it had been awhile since I'd seen her. She was no kid anymore.

"Hey, Jolene. You ought to be careful out here. Current's something nasty."

"Oh, I never swim out here. I know better. Look here, isn't this a beauty?" She picked up a large, flat, purple stone.

"How's your dad doing? Enjoying retirement?"

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"He loves it, all right." Jolene gazed out at the waves and said, slowly, "Are you just out for a stroll, Sheriff?"

"Stroll! Down those steps? No kinda leisure for me." I found it hard to look at her straight. I kept seeing the ten-year-old. "Jo, I suppose you heard about that business up at the Mallone place?"

"You mean the killing." She sat down on a rock that jutted out to sea. She drew her knees up under her, and the dress, a big wide thing, covered her so she looked like a gull nesting. "Yeah. I heard about it."

"I've known you some years now, haven't I?"

"Sure, Mac. Sure."

"Well, then, you can be straight with me. Just how well did you know Gardiner Mallone?"

She looked back up at me finally, those violet eyes so full they looked twice their size. She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Come on now, I think you do." Riley's no crackerjack P.I., but he usually knows who's bedding who. I walked over and put an arm around her. She shivered under the bite of the sea air. "Wasn't there something between you two? Maybe?"

She hid her head against my shoulder. "No, nothing. I swear."

"Here now." I gave her my handkerchief. "You seem pretty broke up about someone you didn't even know, don't you think? All I'm saying is there's been talk."

"They always talk! If you're pretty, they always talk."

"Well, I won't deny you're pretty." I waited till she'd wiped her nose and pretty much ruined any use I'd get out of the handkerchief. "But it's no crime to be taken in by one of those fellows. Happens to a lot of people, Jo. I'm not trying to pry. But I have to know what all was going on with him if I'm to find out who killed him, you see? I won't spread it around." Not that it needed any help from me.

"Okay, Mac. But don't tell Dad, okay?"

" 'Course not."

"We did have something—Gardiner and me. It was nothing big. Not to him, anyway." She kept turning the handkerchief over and over to find a dry corner. "I guess it meant more to me. You know, I was stupid. I thought he'd—well—"

"You thought he'd leave Mrs. Mallone for you?"

She turned and threw the rock in her hand as hard as she could. "Pretty stupid."

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"No stupider than millions of other folks have been over millions of years," I told her.

"Anyway, he broke up with me. About two weeks ago. Just threw me away, like I threw away that rock there." Suddenly she hugged me tight and I couldn't help thinking what a fool that Gardiner Mallone was.

"Okay, I know he wasn't anybody's honor boy. But just think a minute for me. What exactly did you do yesterday? Do you remember?"

She wiped her face with the back of one hand, leaving a smear of red lipstick. "Sure. Yeah. I had a date." She smiled at me a little sheepishly. "Rebound, I guess."

"That's all right. No business of mine. When was the date?"

"Well, let's see. I rode my bike up here. I guess I left about nine o'clock in the morning."

"Yeah? How long does it take to get here, usually?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . uphill, I guess about two hours."

"Did you stop anywhere?"

"Yeah. That's a tough ride, you know. I stopped at Mindy's Muffins, on Garth Drive, for some juice. Probably about ten."

"You take it with you?"

"Yeah. I stopped a second to chat with Mindy."

"You were riding up the west coast of the island, on Garth's Drive, the whole way?"

"That's right. I don't think I stopped again, not for a while."

"Pretty busy road," I said, taking out my notebook. "Should've taken a side street."

"I passed by lots of houses, Mac," she added quickly. "I saw the Creightons getting in their car to go out someplace. Mrs. Billimer waved to me while she was weeding her garden. Then I saw one of the summer people on West Lighthouse Road, when I turned up there. I'm not sure who it was—a tall guy, blond, maybe thirty. I remember thinking he was cute, so I asked him what time it was. He said about ten till eleven."

The leg itched and I shifted my weight. A memory as good as Jolene's always makes me nervous. I took it down as she told it. "That blond fella—must be that Olsen. He has a place up there on West Lighthouse."

"I guess so."

"Now what about this date?"

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"Well, just past the blond guy's house is the end of the road, so I left my bike and went down to the beach. I had some time. I wasn't supposed to meet Tom until eleven-thirty. I came down here and picked up some shells, and then I went back up to the lighthouse."

"Did you see anybody else? Was anyone on the beach?"

"It was pretty cool still in the morning. Not many people were around, no one I knew, except . . ."

"Except?"

She started tearing up again. "Except Mrs. Mallone. I remember seeing her and thinking I just wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. I hid behind the lighthouse until she left, but she saw me. I know she did. She gave me this look, like she knew who I was and what happened with me and Gar—Mr. Mallone."

"You saw Mrs. Mallone? Are you sure about that?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Oh yeah, Mac. It was her. I know it."

"And that was—when?"

"I don't know. It must've been around eleven or so."

"Do you remember what she was wearing? What she was doing?"

"She had that fancy bike of hers—you know, the twelve-speeder. I guess she rode up. I remember thinking she didn't look so good, you know, all sweaty, and I liked seeing her not so made up like she always is. She had on these pointy sunglasses and some kind of jumper—a blue jumper." Jo leaned over and picked up another rock and worried it between her thumb and forefinger.

"And you hid behind the lighthouse?"

"Yeah. I heard her say something to Mr. Crawford on her way out. She didn't stick around long. She rode back off down West Lighthouse. Then I came out and started back down to the beach. Mr. Crawford saw me and waved, and I said something to him. Then I went back down to the beach to wait for Tom."

"Your date?"

"Yeah. He showed up late—about twelve, I guess—and we had a picnic. I'm not sure how long we stayed. Till about two o'clock, three, I guess."

My notebook was filling up fast. "And then how'd you get home? You rode your bike back?"

Jo nodded.

I looked out to the water. Way out north I could see the fog Crawford had predicted getting set to roll in. "Okay, Jo. I appreciate your putting the whole day together like that for me. Now you think

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hard: Is there anybody else that you know of might like to see Mr. Mallone dead? Or even just hurt?"

"No, Mac. Nobody I know about."

I checked through the notes. "And you're sure that was Mrs. Mallone you saw up here, talking to Ian Crawford?"

"I'd know her anywhere."

I patted her hand absently and picked my way through the rocks. The salt air was hitting my arthritis pretty bad, but when I looked up the cliff to the stairs, I knew there was nothing for it but to climb them, so up I started.

Ian's coffee was still hot. "I don't know this Vivian," he said as he poured. "Never met her or her husband."

"Supposed to be real athletic—she's into bike riding. She's been coming to Garth's Reach a few summers now. She never rode here before?"

"Maybe. I never seen her—never met her by name, I ought to say. I did see a stranger, though, yesterday—same day I saw Jolene."

I took another snapshot out of my pocket. "Was this the stranger you saw, Ian?"

"Hmmm. Yeah, might've been. Hard to say." He set out some bread and cheese. "Help yourself, Sheriff."

"Don't mind if I do. Maybe you could tell me who you did see."

He stood at the window, gazing out at the ocean. "Fog's coming in, like I said." He was lost out on the water a moment, and I waited. "What's that you were saying? Oh, the lady I saw. Yeah, she looked something like that picture all right. Bright red hair like that. Young. Twenties, I guess. Had on these sunglasses, real pricey ones, with kinda silvery points on 'em, like they used to wear back years ago. Looked like they had wings."

I nodded.

"She had her hair done up in a scarf, a blue scarf, but lots of hair coming back down behind, red, like I say. And a nice bicycle. You could tell she was no local folk—that's one nice machine she had. And bright lip color, like to blind a man."

"Do you remember what she was wearing?"

"Well . . . I don't know, exactly. Some kinda shorts and top. Real short, like they wear 'em now. I didn't get too close a look. She was pushing her bike down the hill, and she just turned around and waved and smiled. I said hello just to be friendly. Saw her just before my show started, or believe me, I wouldn't've noticed."

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I stood up and stretched. "Thanks ever so, Ian. I won't be bothering you again, I hope."

But his eyes were on the window. "You can see it comin' in," he murmured to nobody in particular. "It rolls in just like a blanket, and before you know it, the air turns into water. You stay wrapped up here, there's nobody knows where you are. Might as well be hiding in a grave, covered with a shroud."

I couldn't say I liked the way the Mallone murder was shaping up. I like a clean murder, if you'll pardon the expression, the kind of thing that's cut and dried. I stayed at the station late that evening and drank a couple of pots of coffee. I wasn't going to sleep anyway.

Riley stopped in about ten. "I thought you were off keeping the Starlight gang in line," I said.

"Just thought I'd let you know I looked into Jolene's story, and it checks out. Mindy at Mindy's Muffins said Jo stopped in about a quarter to ten and stayed a few minutes. Mrs. Billimer said she saw Jo somewhere between ten and eleven. The Creightons back her up, too. Even Greg Olsen, up on West Lighthouse."

I shrugged. "Figures."

Riley poured the dregs from my percolator into one of the stained mugs. "It just doesn't follow that Jo did it."

"Who says she did? I don't think Jolene had anything to do with it. I just wish she could've told me she never saw Vivian Mallone up at the Point, but both her and Crawford did."

"She was pretty upset about being dumped like that."

"Nah. Oh, maybe she was, but a young girl like her—she doesn't *kill* for something like that. She still loves him. She thought he'd leave his wife."

"I think we ought to check into that boyfriend. Maybe Vivian got him to do it for her."

"Lead's cold. I checked it out."

"But I didn't." Riley grinned. "How about it? I could go to New York, do a stakeout near the little snotnose's office—"

"Forget it. Take your vacation on your own time." I stood up and the knee cracked good.

"Where are you going now?"

"I don't know. Somewhere to think."

Riley looked at me a minute with as much sympathy as a young fellow like him can muster. "Have you had dinner? We could catch a late supper at the Seahorse. Good fish and chips."

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It didn't sound half bad, and I knew the kid meant well, but I wasn't up to it. "Maybe tomorrow. Shouldn't be driving too much in this stuff anyway." I pointed out the window at the solid white sheet that engulfed the station house.

"Yeah, well, take it easy, okay?"

"Thanks, Riley."

The place I usually go to think is the Point, but I didn't need Riley telling me I shouldn't go with the fog as thick as the phlegm in my throat. I've been driving these island roads so long I don't need to look at them anymore. They just take me.

It gave me a little comfort to follow the route I thought Vivian Mallone had taken. Up from her place past Henderson's was straight along Seaside, shrouded to the point that I couldn't see five feet in front of me. Lloyd's place was hidden from the roadside. A little ways past, on an impulse, I left Seaside and turned west, on a little road creatively named West Fork. It curves around some quarter mile or so before meeting up with Garth's Drive on the west side of the island. It gets tricky up there; a second fork, Sandy Hook, will take you back onto Seaside if you're not careful. But as I say, I know the roads.

In the murk up on West Lighthouse I could make out a yellow blot of light, like a bit of paint, that I realized must be Greg Olsen's place. I stopped the car.

I flashed my badge up to his peephole and he stood aside to let me in. "You're the sheriff?"

"That's right. I guess you're Greg Olsen, though I don't think I've ever had the pleasure."

He led me into his living room, a cramped, dark little space cluttered with fishing gear and cheered a little by the fireplace crackling at one end. "I'm a little bit of a hermit when I come out to the island," he admitted, and cleared a chair for me. "I talked to your deputy earlier, about that murder."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not trying to harass you or anything." I shook my head when he held up a can of coffee. "This thing's been bugging me, is all. Riley says the girl's story checks out—that you saw her biking up here yesterday morning."

"That's right. Dark-haired girl, nineteen or twenty. Nice looking."

"Yeah. I was just wondering if you happened to see anybody else come by your way."

He thought a minute, crossing his fingers over his knees. "Well . . . yeah, now that you mention it. Just for a minute, through

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the window after I went in. The woman who lives down there on Seaside—I think she's the wife of the man who was killed, isn't she?"

My heart did a quick little gallop. "Yeah. That's her, all right."

"I just glanced out the window, trying to see if that dark-haired girl was still out there. She was gone, but I caught a glimpse of the redhead up the road from here a little ways, turning her bike around. She'd got it stuck somewhere, it looked like. It's muddy up there. It was one of those bulky, awkward sort of bikes—I think that was the problem. Looked like it had seen better days. And I remember thinking she didn't look too good, either."

The fire snapped in the quiet. "What do you mean? Was she sick?"

"Not exactly. She just looked kind of grubby. You know, no makeup on. My ex-wife's a redhead like her, and it's the same thing: Without their makeup, they look like they don't have any features—no eyelashes, no eyebrows, no lips, nothing. Everything's washed out and pale. Tell you the truth, she looks a lot like my ex-wife. She gave me a start there for a minute."

I scratched the back of my neck, not knowing what to say. Sometimes I feel like I've missed out on some big secret by being a bachelor all these years.

"Is that all, Sheriff?"

"Hmmm? Oh, yeah. I won't take up any more of your evening." I stood up. "You didn't happen to notice which way Mrs. Mallone was heading, did you?"

"No, I'm sorry. She was pulling the bike out of the reeds around toward the road again. I guess she was going up to the lighthouse."

"Thanks," I said, and shook his hand. It looked like I was going up to the lighthouse myself.

I didn't feel like bothering Ian Crawford—he gets in a mood of concentration when the weather gums up the coast—so I wandered along the Point by myself. The air pressed into my skin like a cold, clammy finger. The gimp leg ached in response.

I couldn't see the water, of course, but I heard it crashing below, throwing itself on the rocks. I thought I heard disconnected voices float along the beach, but the fog plays tricks on you. I gazed into the mist; into nothing.

The reeds rustled on my right and my head snapped round, but the air was empty. Then again came the rustling, this time to my left. Or was it the same direction? For a panicky moment, my ears

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lost their sense of balance and I couldn't tell what was coming at me or from where. The mist closed in like a noose around my throat. "Hey there!" I barked out. "Who is it? Who's there?"

That cool, pretty face framed by red hair appeared out of the cloud. "Just me, Sheriff," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you." She walked up beside me and looked out over the misty coast. "It's so pretty up here."

I felt like a fool for being scared, even for a minute. "You shouldn't be here, Mrs. Mallone. It's dangerous. You can walk along here and lose your direction, go right over the cliff and be dashed on the rocks before you know it."

"Is that so." She didn't look at me, but kept her eyes toward the water, which I knew she couldn't see. One hand fingered the pricey necklace she wore. "You don't trust me, Sheriff, do you? You think I had something to do with Gardiner's death."

I shrugged. "We don't know anything yet. You say you biked up to the lighthouse that morning. Witnesses back you up."

She didn't answer, but wiped the dampness from her face. "I loved Gardiner."

"Yeah, well. I'm sure you did."

Vivian Mallone held out a careful hand in front of her face and studied her fingernails. I did, too, seeing them there stark against the fog, an almost blinding red.

A gull screamed above us and I looked up, following his call in the direction of the lighthouse.

Like to blind a man.

My eyes flickered back to Mrs. Mallone's face and she gazed back at me, startled, I could see. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

That's what was bugging me. That was it all along. I took a step back from the cliff.

"Mr. MacReady, will you please stop staring?" She hugged her sweater around her. "It's getting cold, and I ought to be going home."

"That's some nail polish you've got on," I said.

"Yes? So?"

"Pretty color. Like your lipstick."

"I don't have any lipstick on." She blotted her mouth with one finger.

"No, not tonight. But you must have a color like that at home, don't you? To match it?"

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She wavered a little in front of my eyes. "What are you getting at, Sheriff?"

"What I mean is, you must wear it out, don't you, usually? When you're riding?"

She shrugged. "I ride early in the morning. I don't bother with—"

And then she froze. Still, like a sparrow, on the edge of the Point.

"You were going to say . . . ?"

She breathed in short little bursts. "Nothing. Nothing."

"Of course, nothing," I said. "You got nothing to say, do you? You might be interested in the fact that Ian Crawford swears he saw you up at the lighthouse around the time your husband was killed yesterday morning."

"That's because I was here," she spat.

"And he said your lipstick was a bright red color. Like your nails there."

She didn't speak.

"And you might also like to know that Greg Olsen, who lives in that little house up on West Lighthouse Road, said he saw you just before that. And he said you were pale as a ghost, not a drop of makeup on your face." She waited. "Just like you looked when you walked in the house after your ride."

Her hand drew up slowly to catch at her throat and the chain of pearls around it.

"And how do you suppose," I went on, "that you rode up to the lighthouse past Lloyd Henderson's place with that fancy twelve-speed bike and then managed to have an old junky bike when you got up to Greg Olsen's? And what were you doing on West Lighthouse, anyway, when you rode up the east coast of the island?"

"Sheriff, you don't—"

"And how"—I was whispering now—"how do you figure you'd gotten your fancy new bike back by the time you saw Ian Crawford at the lighthouse ten minutes later?"

"I . . ." It came out more like a sigh than a word, and she took another step back. I caught at her hand as she slid on the wet reeds and skated backward. She flailed against me, just like people who are drowning sometimes take down their rescuers with them, and we both slid a little farther towards the edge. With one quick yank I dragged us both back to the rocks and pulled her closer to me.

"What are you trying to do, get us both killed?" I hissed at her. "Come on now, admit it. That wasn't you at all up at that lighthouse, was it? Was it?"

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She broke into tears and sobbed for a minute, a delayed reaction from the fall she nearly took, and then dried her eyes on my sleeve and pushed me away. "All right, what if it wasn't?" Her hand leaped out and gripped mine. "I could take us both down to the rocks right now, couldn't I?"

I pulled my pistol. "No. I don't think you could."

She stared dully into the barrel. "It wasn't just me," she said in a low voice. "You can't pin it all on me. It was that little bitch he was sleeping with."

"Who? Jolene?"

Vivian's shoulders jumped with a little laugh. "Oh, I found out long ago about them. I confronted Gardiner with it and he promised to drop her, but that wasn't really what I wanted." Her lip curled again like a worm. "It was the last straw. She was the last in a very long line and Gardiner told her that. It was the sort of thing he enjoyed telling. He was tired of her anyway—her little teenage passions. But she was different from the others, Sheriff. She broke down. She wanted him dead, wanted a piece of him, and I figured that much out myself. So I contacted her. She's a tramp, but that's not the worst thing to be in the world." Suddenly her voice turned cold and calm, now that it was out. She opened her purse and took out a cigarette. She had some trouble lighting it in the damp air, but finally it took.

"I understand her, Sheriff. She may seem like a sweet little island girl to you, but I assure you she's much more like me than you think. So we worked out a deal. I would bike up to the lighthouse, pass Henderson, and make sure he saw me. Then I'd turn on Sandy Hook and meet Jolene coming up Garth's Drive. It was easy from there. She took my bicycle, dressed identically to me, put on a wig and my scarf and dark glasses. Then she rode up to the lighthouse and showed that old coot"—she threw a hand in the direction of the lighthouse—"that I was there. Then, I suppose, she changed her clothes sometime while she was there. Meanwhile, all I had to do was bike straight back down West Lighthouse to West Fork—I made a circle around Henderson's house so he wouldn't see me on the way back—and back to our place." She took a puff. "So you see, Sheriff, I wasn't at the lighthouse when Gardiner was killed. I was standing right over him. With this."

Like a flash her hand whipped out of her purse and a shot whistled straight into my bum knee, which burned and buckled under me. I cursed as I fell to the ground. Damn her, I'd let her story get the

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better of me, and let my gun go slack. But I struggled up and fired one of my own.

Even in the fog, I'm a pretty good shot, and she dropped the gun as the bullet found her shooting arm. I took hold of her ankles and wrestled her quickly to the ground. "You can't use that," she jabbered breathlessly. "I'll deny everything."

With some trouble, I got to my feet and pulled her up with me. I kept my revolver close at her back while I slipped the handcuffs on. "You do whatever you think is best," I said and pushed her ahead of me back to the car.

I wasn't worried. Not about proving her story, anyway. I didn't care what kind of fancy city lawyer she was about to hire, I'd see she'd pay for what she did. Silently we rode through the fog back to the station house. There was only one thing bugging me now, and I didn't know a thing I could do about it. Somehow or other, I was going to have to explain to that pipsqueak Riley about the bullet hole in my gimp leg. ●

Amateur Executioner

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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

This month EQMM *presents a case from a relatively new series by author Michael Z. Lewin. Mr. Lewin seems almost to be creating a new genre here, a cross between the family drama and the crime story. Unlike most P.I. stories, which feature a central character and his associates in diminishing order of importance, these "Lunghi" stories by author Lewin revolve around an entire family of investigators who are as likely to crack a case gathered around the family dinner table as on the mean streets of London . . .*

GAINS AND LOSSES

by MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

1.

"It's not my case," Walter said. "I mean, she's not one of my clients. I do conveyancing. I don't handle criminal cases for the firm."

"But Walter happened to be there when the woman came out," Rosetta explained. "And she was so upset. Crying, wasn't she, Walter?"

"Copious tears," Walter said.

"He couldn't just walk past her as if she didn't exist," Rosetta said. "That's not your nature, is it, Walter?"

"So what did you do?" Gina asked.

"I said, 'There, there,' and I offered her a cup of tea."

"Even though he was very busy himself," Rosetta said. "Weren't you, dear?" She patted her sort-of fiancé approvingly on the shoulder.

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"I was meeting a crucial deadline for an exchange of contracts," Walter confirmed. "A big deal. Hush hush."

Gina and Angelo exchanged glances. Angelo said to his sister Rosetta, "I don't mean to hurry you, Rose, but I've got an appointment."

Rosetta said, "Tell them, Walter."

Walter said, "So I took the woman to my office and asked her what the matter was. She said she was crying because nobody was going to *do* anything. The 'nobody' being Kirsten Boyle, our criminal specialist."

"What's the case?" Gina asked.

"The crying woman's brother was arrested and nobody cares," Rosetta said.

"The father is rich, but he won't pay for a solicitor," Walter said, "and the brother has no money of his own. Kirsten got the case on the rota. She's very good but she's, well, I shouldn't say notorious exactly, but her reputation is that she can't be bothered unless she thinks she has a chance."

"The brother is pleading guilty," Rosetta said, "but he told his sister he is innocent."

"The sister says he has no self-esteem," Walter said. "It sounds a very sad case."

"But I still don't understand what you're asking us to do," Angelo said. He looked at his sister. He looked at Walter. He looked at his watch.

Walter said, "Would you see the woman about her brother? I told her I knew these wonderful detectives who wouldn't charge the earth. Would you talk to her? Evaluate the facts?"

"Of course we'll see her," Gina said. "That's our business."

"But Walter wondered if you'd see her and maybe make a telephone call or two, for free," Rosetta said.

"Oh," Angelo said.

"Just the first interview," Rosetta said. "And checking details with the police. We *can* afford it."

Rosetta's opinion on the financial aspect was definitive. She was the family firm's part-time accountant.

2.

"No money. Disgusting," the Old Man said at dinner that night. "Start doing charity cases, you end needing charity."

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"She sounded a sweet enough young woman, Poppa," Gina said to her father-in-law. "And she's very concerned about her brother."

Marie, Gina and Angelo's daughter, stuck out her tongue but so that only Gina could see. Marie's brother, David, was away, on a school trip to a conservation park, but the concept of "brother" was too powerful for Marie not to acknowledge it.

"Sweet don't pay the rent," the Old Man said.

"Fortunately," Gina said, "my brilliant father-in-law had the business acumen to buy his premises outright when he got the chance. That was a very clever move and it also means we don't have any rent to pay."

"Soft-soap don't wash, young woman," the Old Man said. But in truth he was pleased by any flattery.

"Let her tell the story," Momma said. "Have you finished your pie?"

"Is it gone from my plate?"

"No."

"Well, I haven't finished it then, have I?" The Old Man picked up his knife and fork. Momma winked at Gina.

"There isn't much more to tell," Gina said. "The sister made the appointment for tomorrow morning."

"What was her voice like, Mum?" Marie asked. "That's a good thing to ask, isn't it, Granddad?"

The Old Man smiled benevolently and nodded at his granddaughter. Marie could do no wrong in his eyes anyway, but when she joined in conversation about the family's cases he was more pleased with her than ever.

Only the four of them were at table. Angelo was not due back from a medical-claim surveillance until, perhaps, ten. Rosetta was out with Walter. And Salvatore, the eldest, appeared or not for meals solely at his own convenience.

Gina said, "Her voice was on the plummy side. You know, saying 'tine' when she means 'town.' 'I shall come to tine for ten on Tuesday.' "

"Did she say what her brother is supposed to have done?" Marie asked.

"He works in a hospital and he stole morphine from the drug cupboard."

The Old Man groaned.

"What's the matter, Granddad?" Marie asked.

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The Old Man said, "Druggies. Terrible payers. I lost more money working for druggies than any other kind of client."

"Oh," Marie said, "I thought you were in pain. I'm so glad you're not."

Gina and Momma looked at each other.

The Old Man said, "Three women in the room, but who hears my pain? Only Marie."

3.

When Sandra Summerson climbed the stairs to the Lunghis' office she was late by nearly half an hour. Although Gina would shortly be due elsewhere, she was pleased to be able to meet the woman who had so moved Walter.

Sandra Summerson was small, fine-featured, about twenty, and she was expensively dressed. To Gina's eye she did not carry herself like someone who cried easily.

"Ms. Summerson?" Angelo said.

"I am."

"I am Angelo Lunghi and this is my colleague and wife, Gina."

Sandra Summerson did not offer to shake hands. Instead she sat and said, "I must have walked down Walcott Street a hundred times before today without ever noticing this doorway or your sign."

"The firm has been here since nineteen forty-seven," Angelo said, "but most people are either on their way into town or looking at the shop windows."

Gina found herself growing uneasy with Sandra Summerson. It was the way she sat, which struck Gina as authoritative when the fact was she was receiving a favour. Gina also heard a harshness in the voice that she had not felt on the telephone, even at "tine." Gina said, "About your brother, Ms. Summerson."

Angelo was about to offer tea, the Lunghis' usual practice to help clients relax. Then he remembered Gina's imminent appointment and thought he understood.

Sandra Summerson said, "I do so admire people who come straight to the point, Mrs. Lunghi. My poor brother Thom is accused of stealing twenty ampoules of morphine. But he isn't guilty. I know it sounds odd, but although the morphine was certainly in Thom's flat, it was nothing to do with him."

"How does he come to have access to morphine?" Angelo asked.

"He doesn't," Sandra Summerson said. "He works as a hospital orderly, but he doesn't have a key to the drug stores."

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"But this morphine came from the hospital?"

"Yes."

"And am I right that your brother is planning a plea of guilty?" Angelo said.

"He's never admitted stealing the morphine," Sandra Summerson said, "but the police also charged him with 'possessing' it, and since it was in his flat he says he must have possessed it, because that's what the word means."

Gina and Angelo exchanged glances. They could get the police side from their friend Charlie.

"How long has he worked at the hospital?" Angelo asked.

"Since he was sixteen."

"And how old is he now?" Gina asked.

"Twenty-two, Mrs. Lunghi."

The way Sandra Summerson said "Mrs. Lunghi" particularly annoyed Gina. It seemed to define, diminish, and age her.

"Where is your brother?" Angelo asked. "Is he in custody?"

"No, I sold some jewellery to put up his bail so he's at his home."

"And where is home?" Angelo asked.

"Thom has a flat in the Royal Crescent."

Angelo and Gina exchanged glances again. You could get very long odds locally against any hospital orderly's home address being in the Royal Crescent.

Sandra Summerson said, "Thom inherited the flat from our Auntie Beatrice. Apart from that, he's skint. He hardly earns anything at the hospital. If it comes to that, I'm skint too."

Gina could not help letting her eyes run over Sandra Summerson's clothes again.

Sandra Summerson said, "I know I dress well. That is because Daddy allows me clothes on account. I can also charge food and drink. But he starves me of cash."

"So you don't have a career?" Gina said.

"A job, Mrs. Lunghi? Certainly not. I was brought up to expect that I would never have to work. I have no occupational qualifications or skills whatever, bar a native capacity to organise other people. I assist a few medical charities, because Daddy approves of them, and I make an effort on behalf of the Festival each year."

"I see," Gina said.

Picking his words carefully, Angelo said, "Is it, perhaps, a little unexpected that your brother should choose a career as a hospital orderly?"

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"He is the family rebel," Sandra Summerson said. "And he is paying for his refusal to bend to Daddy's expectations at this very moment. If anybody else in the family were in trouble, Daddy would hire a fleet of lawyers and gold-card investigators to 'beat the rap.' But he won't lift a finger for Thom, who is his only son. And it's not fair. It's not bloody fair."

4.

"It turns out," Angelo reported at dinner Tuesday evening, "that the father is a doctor. A surgeon."

"Cosmetic surgery," Gina said.

"He is world-renowned in his field," Angelo said.

"And his particular specialty," Gina said, "is giving people interesting-looking scars. He was the first in this country."

"It's to give their faces, or other parts of their bodies, character," Angelo said. "It's supposedly becoming even more fashionable than tattoos."

"Good heavens," Momma said. "He *scars* people?"

"On the private or the NHS?" the Old Man asked.

Salvatore snorted tiredly and said, "Trust you to go straight for the credit rating, Poppa."

"There speaks someone who *has* no credit rating," the Old Man said. Salvatore was a painter and only occasionally a detective in the family firm. The friction between him and his father was chronic, especially when Salvatore did not make the effort to lubricate their contacts.

Gina said, "Sleeping badly, Sally?"

"I was up all night."

"I thought painters needed light," the Old Man said. He appealed for support from the rest of the table. "Or were you just studying the model?"

"My father always taught me," Salvatore said, "that time spent planning work saves working time."

"Be quiet, you two," Momma said. "I want to hear about this poor innocent boy and his sister." Then to the Old Man she said, "My Salvatore is tired. Let him eat."

"He started it," the Old Man said.

"That's right," Marie said. "Uncle Sal started it."

The Old Man beamed at Marie. Salvatore added rice to his curry.

Angelo said, "This cosmetic surgeon was already a success when he inherited a lot of money from his wife."

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The Old Man wanted to ask how much money, but hesitated.

Angelo said, "The son, Thomas, was fifteen when his mother died and, although he was academically gifted, he dropped out of school at sixteen. He's twenty-two now and the father considers him to be wasting his life."

"You talked to this rich doctor?" the Old Man asked finally.

"No," Gina said.

"Maybe he'll pay for this free work you do," the Old Man said.

"I doubt it, Poppa," Gina said. "He and his son are estranged."

Salvatore began to make a comment, but stopped. Then, because he had attracted everyone's attention, he asked, "Does he have a police record, the kid, or is this arrest his first?"

"Good question, Sal," Angelo said with a smile.

"Previous drug offences?" Salvatore asked.

"No, but Charlie says that four years ago the son received a police caution. Care to guess what for?"

Salvatore considered the challenge, and that it had been addressed directly to him. "Painting pictures without parental permission?"

"For harassing his father," Angelo said.

"Just a caution?" the Old Man said. "He didn't get life?"

Salvatore managed a smile, but it was Momma who asked, "How did he do that, harass his father?"

Angelo said, "Thomas Summerson filled out hundreds of coupons. He enrolled his father for courses, got firms to send him further particulars, subscribed him to magazines, pledged contributions to charities. And for each of them he gave his father's name as 'Dr. Scar.' "

"Good heavens!" Momma said.

"Charlie says that since the son was cautioned, there have been no further complaints about him. The only other thing anybody knows is that he writes poetry."

5.

When Angelo opened the post the next morning, he examined the addresses on the envelopes more carefully than usual. But at nine he heard footsteps on the stairs. Alone in the office, he scooped the buff pile into an empty drawer and sat up straight.

Sandra Summerson swept in. She stopped directly in front of the desk and slapped a stack of twenty-pound notes down on it. She said, "I know I'm a bitch, but I respect Thom and the sacrifices he's made

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for principle. That's five hundred pounds. Don't ask how I got it, but it's yours. Your fee or retainer or whatever you call it. Please, please help Thom. Gaol would destroy his innocence, no matter what he says!"

Angelo hardly knew where to begin. He said, "Would you care for a cup of tea, Ms. Summerson?"

"I'd *kill* for a cup of tea," she said. "Do you have Darjeeling?"

When their cups were full Angelo said, "I'll make out a receipt for the money."

"I don't *want* a receipt," Sandra Summerson said.

"That's as may be, but I need to write you one. Perhaps while I do it you could tell me more about your brother. When did Thom inherit his flat?"

"About two years ago."

"Where did he live before then?"

"At home."

"So," Angelo said, "your brother left school to work at the hospital, but despite your father's disapproval, he continued to live at home."

"Daddy did more than disapprove," Sandra Summerson said.

"What did he do?"

"He convinced Thom that he—Thom—was dying."

"Excuse me?"

"He told Thom that he only had a few months to live. And Thom believed him." Sandra Summerson burst into tears.

"I suppose you put your arm around her and stroked her hair," Gina said over coffee at eleven-thirty. "And promised you would make it all better for the poor ickle girl."

"No," Angelo said. "I started crying too, so she stroked my hair."

"You, I don't know," Gina said, "but her I wouldn't put it past."

"You don't like Sandra, do you?"

" 'Sandra,' is it?" Gina said as she poured the coffee. "The tears flow when she's with Walter, and then again alone with you. No, I don't trust your Sandra."

"Mmmm," Angelo said.

"Her brother Thomas, on the other hand, seems an inoffensive boy. He told me all about a butterfly he rescued when he was seven. Or was he eight?"

Angelo took a Bourbon biscuit.

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"But he was not very helpful about his crime," Gina continued. "The police showed up and found the ampoules of morphine on a shelf in his kitchen. He said he didn't know they were there, but neither did he have an explanation."

"What's the flat like?" Angelo asked.

"It's on the first floor," Gina said. "It's almost empty apart from the futon he sleeps on, but it has spectacular views."

"Good-looking boy?" Angelo asked.

"Oh yes. And *very* friendly," Gina said. "But he has a fatalistic attitude about going to gaol."

"It wouldn't come to that, would it?"

"Perhaps not," Gina said. "But he plans to plead guilty to possession and he's been suspended from his job. More coffee?"

"Thanks."

Gina warmed both cups.

Angelo said, "Did he say anything about his family while you were there?"

"He says his sister is a bitch, his father is the devil, and that I am a warm person."

"He didn't happen to mention melanoma, by any chance?" Angelo asked.

6.

"What's melanoma?" David asked.

"It's a kind of skin cancer," Angelo said.

"The exact same kind computer freaks get when they go outdoors," Marie said to her brother. "That's why they have to stay in dark rooms all their whole lives. And why they should never go to conservation parks, or pop concerts."

"I wouldn't want to go to a pop concert anyway," David said. "All those sweaty people herded together? Ugh!"

"You," Marie said with venom, "have no appreciation of what's important in life."

"Yes I do," David protested.

"Nerd," Marie said. "Dag."

Momma and the Old Man were eating in their own flat.

Angelo said, "So when Thomas was seventeen, the father convinced him that a rash was a melanoma and that he, the son, had only a few months to live."

"And it wasn't true?" David asked.

"It wasn't true," Angelo said.

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"But why did the father do it?"

"He thought once the son found out he wasn't dying after all he would value life more. That it would make him more ambitious, make him decide to go back to school and have a career."

"I hope he didn't," Marie said. "I hope he told him where to stick it."

"The episode made the son start writing poetry," Gina said.

"Good!" Marie said.

"What a tragic family!" Rosetta said. "And so do you think it was the father who planted the morphine in the son's flat?"

The dinner table conversation stopped dead. Everybody turned to Rosetta who, alone among the family, almost never made suggestions about cases.

"What did I say?" Rosetta asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all, Rose," Angelo said. "Go on. Why do you think it might be the father?"

"Because being a doctor, I suppose he could have access to hospital morphine. Because he didn't like the way the son harassed him. Because he still didn't like what the son was doing with his life and maybe *this* would shake him up."

"Possible," Angelo said. "Possible, possible. I think maybe someone goes to see Dr. Daddy tomorrow."

David said, "I want to know what this boy did when he found out that he didn't have melanoma."

"That's when he harassed his father with the Dr. Scar junk mail," Angelo said. "Otherwise he just stayed at his job with the hospital and spent more and more of his time writing poetry."

"Good!" Marie said.

"What's up with Marie?" Angelo asked Gina when they were in bed. "Some days she's nice as could be and other days you could cut a finger, she's so spikey, spikey, spikey."

Gina believed that these days Marie was only "nice" when the Old Man was around and that she was cultivating her grandfather for a purpose. But she answered more generally. "Marie's just being an adolescent. I know I was moody at her age."

"I find that hard to believe," Angelo said.

Gina *thought* this to be a compliment about her equable nature but did not make further enquiries. She said, "With an adolescent the key is to pick your battles. Let them win some minor ones, but hold out if it is something major."

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"And if she wanted to drop out of school to become a hospital orderly, would that be major or minor?" Angelo asked.

"Marie? An unglamorous job? If she did that I'd send her straight to a doctor," Gina said. "But not," she added quickly, "to a cosmetic surgeon."

7.

To her surprise, Gina had only to tell Dr. Summerson's secretary that her visit would be about Thom to get an appointment the next morning. She arrived on time and was shown in promptly. Summerson was a slim man of about fifty with protruding eyes that seemed always to stare. His face bore no suggestion whatever of wrinkles caused by frequent laughter.

Gina began to explain who she was when Summerson cut her off. "You think I don't know? Pah! You work for my daughter to assist my so-called son. Of course I know! Where do you think she got the money to hire you?"

"I didn't realise you gave it to her," Gina said.

"Give? Pah! She stole it from me."

"I didn't know that either," Gina said.

"Ah!" Summerson said, "but how do you think I knew to leave it out where she could steal it?"

"I have no idea," Gina said.

"The telephones!" Summerson said. "She rang you, right?"

"He bugs his own home telephone?" Angelo said at lunch. "That takes the biscuit," he said, taking a biscuit.

"He is not the world's most pleasant man."

"So is Rose right? Did he plant the morphine at Thom's flat?"

"When I suggested it he said I was absurd. But I said that anyone who diagnosed a false melanoma for his son could hardly accuse me of absurdity. He said I had a point."

"You sound like you got along with this 'devil,' " Angelo said.

"I understand him better now. He struck me as someone who sees family problems as things he can solve by simple, direct intervention. Surgically, you might say."

"If only a family were simple," Angelo said with feeling.

"That's the point," Gina said. "Dr. Summerson is just not equipped to deal with adolescents and adolescence on his own."

"So he's still on his own?"

"Yes," Gina said. "Though I wouldn't say that was by choice."

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"No?"

"He strongly recommends a three-inch rising scar above my left eyebrow. He says it would lend an air of mystery and allure. What do you think?"

8.

Angelo called Charlie after lunch to ask how the police had come to raid Thomas Summerson's flat in the first place. While Charlie checked, Gina went to the Royal Crescent.

Thom answered the door wearing swimming trunks and a T-shirt decorated with the image of a sumo wrestler. "Oh," he said, when he saw who it was. He turned and went back upstairs.

Gina took the "oh" as an invitation and followed.

"It's not that I want to go to gaol," Thom said as they sat facing each other on the floor of his front room. "But the police say the morphine was here, and I can't deny that, can I?"

"But who put it here?"

"I have no idea."

"Why was it put here?"

Thom shrugged.

Gina said, "If you're not defending yourself because you want to go to gaol, say for the experience, that probably won't happen. Not for a first offence. Most likely you'll be fined, though chances are you'll lose your job."

"I'm already suspended," Thom said. "I wrote a poem about it this morning. Would you like to hear it?"

"Please," Gina said quickly, if without conviction.

"Suspension," Thom read. "By Thomas Summerson. Suspended, from my vital thread/Suspended from my daily bread/Hanging as the sun goes past/Doubtful of my next repast . . ."

Thom read slowly. The poem lasted for five minutes.

"Interesting," Gina said when it was over. "Is any of your poetry published?"

"No," Thom said, and for the first time he was not languid. "I don't think poetry publishers can be bothered even to read verse that's in the poet's own hand, verse that isn't typed out prettily. But I'll never stoop to that. Word processors only give you processed words. And that," he said sternly, "can never be *good*."

"It must be frustrating for you," Gina said.

"What must?" Thom asked, with an abruptness that suddenly put Gina in mind of the young man's father.

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"It can't be easy to write and not have your work read. To put in all that effort and have no appreciation back from the like-minded. There must be people out there who *would* appreciate your work." Gina swallowed and added, "Lots of them."

"Publication," Thom said slowly, obviously mulling over Gina's words. "I do certainly find that reading a poem aloud to other human beings helps me to find its pulse, its heart."

"So you read your work to people?"

"Oh yes," Thom said. "I hold readings here. Sandra lays on food and drink and I provide the entertainment."

"And who comes?"

"I invite everybody I know. I know you now. I'll invite you. The next one is on Friday evening. I've invited the policeman who arrested me too. I invite absolutely everyone I know. Except father, of course."

9.

Over dinner it was Rosetta who picked up the case baton. "The key," she said to the table, "is to identify someone who both attends the poetry readings and who works at the hospital."

"It could be a patient," David said. "He might know some of them too."

"But a patient wouldn't be able to steal the morphine, stupid," Marie said. "Would he, Granddad? Not as easily as someone who worked there."

"Good point, Marie," the Old Man said.

"Charlie says the police got an anonymous tip-off that the morphine was there," Angelo said.

"Whoever phoned the police, that's who did it," Rosetta said.

"How about the sister?" David said. Everybody stopped eating and looked at the youngest member of the family. "At least if she made the tip-off phone call, then there would be a tape recording of it at Dr. Scar's house."

After a moment of consideration, Gina said, "I think if he knew Sandra was responsible, Dr. Summerson would have told me."

"Besides," Marie said, "why would she do it, except that it was her brother?"

"Good question," the Old Man said. "Why? Why did whoever did it do it?"

"It's all so obvious," Momma said impatiently.

"Is it?" Gina asked.

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"So take off our blinkers," the Old Man said. He winked at Marie. "What's the answer?"

"Someone who works with your Thomas is in love with him, but he spurned her. She did it to get back at him."

"Interesting," Angelo said.

"Or maybe someone is jealous of him," Rosetta suggested.

"Jealous? Of a penniless poet?" the Old Man said dismissively.

But Angelo said, "His workplace. His workmates. Good, good, good."

There was a pause in conversation around the table.

Marie said, "Granddad?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"Do you think music is important?"

"Important?"

"To make someone a complete and rounded individual." Marie smiled invitingly.

"I suppose so," the Old Man said. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered," Marie said.

10.

"At least we've solved one mystery today," Gina said to Angelo when they were in bed.

"What's that?"

"Why Marie has been cuddling up to Poppa."

"Has she?" Angelo asked. He considered. "Why?"

"She's going to ask him for the money to go to a pop concert."

"Is she?"

"You heard about music and the rounded individual at dinner."

"I thought she was asking for a school essay or something."

"Marie? Talking about schoolwork voluntarily?"

"Good point," Angelo said.

"The Mordant Wits," Gina said.

"What?"

"In Birmingham, at the NEC. A month ago she asked if she could go if she saved for the ticket from her allowance. I said we'd talk about it when she'd saved the money."

"And has she?"

"Marie? Save money?"

"Mmmm," Angelo said. "So when is it, this concert?"

"I don't remember, but soon."

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"And tell me," Angelo said, "if she gets the money from Poppa, will this be a minor adolescent battle you can let her win, or a major one she has to lose?"

"What do you think?" Gina asked. "Could she handle herself at something like a pop concert?"

"If she can get money for something like that out of Poppa, she can handle herself anywhere," Angelo said.

11.

"Sandra Summerson!" Gina said suddenly. She and Angelo were sharing a pot of coffee, after the children left for school but before time to open the office.

"What about her?"

"If she can get money out of her father to pay for us, she can help us solve the case."

Angelo understood the reference but not the point.

"She organises food and drink for her brother's poetry readings. So she must attend them. She's also the busybody type who would have to know who everyone was. She would know if Thomas had spurned the affections of someone at work."

"I'll phone her," Angelo said. "And see if I can get her to come to 'tine' again this morning."

"Oh God!" Sandra Summerson said when Gina and Angelo explained what they were thinking. "Regis Woolwich."

Angelo turned to Gina. "Not a spurned girlfriend. A spurned boyfriend."

"I tell them," Sandra Summerson said. "I do tell them. But I can't help it if they don't pay attention, can I? Is that my fault? What am I supposed to do?"

Sandra Summerson paused but Gina and Angelo both opted to wait her out.

Sandra Summerson said, "Should I stay in my room at home? Should I not come out of doors? Am I supposed to ignore my only brother as he strives to improve at the only thing that means *anything* to him? How could I do that? Is it my fault if soft, daft people like Regis fall for me? Is it *my* responsibility?"

"Who exactly is Regis?" Angelo asked.

"I told him. I told him as soon as he took my hand for the very first time, I said, 'Regis, don't get involved with me. I am bad news for people who fancy me, because I am a *bitch*. I only like men who

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are *very* rough. That's just the way I'm made. I am bad news.' "

"But he didn't take the warning?" Gina said.

"No," Sandra Summerson said. "He didn't. And he was *so* bitter."

12.

"So it was a case of the bitter bit," David said.

"Very *amusant,*" Marie said acidly, but she smiled at her grandfather. "That's French, in case you didn't know, little David."

"So this Regis, he was in love with this Sandra?" Momma asked.

"Desperately," Angelo said. "He met her at one of the poetry readings."

"Salvatore, you like poetry, don't you?" said Momma, who yearned to see her eldest paired.

"Not a lot," Salvatore said.

"But such an attractive sister, by all accounts," Momma said.

"Salvatore wouldn't like this one, Momma," Gina said.

"Whoever knows about the path of love?" Momma said. "She's single, right, this girl? Let him make up his own mind. And free food and drink, on Friday night. Am I right?"

Rosetta said, "So in his bitter frustration, Regis tried to hurt her by hurting her brother?"

"It was the only way he could think of," Gina said.

"Charlie says Regis confessed immediately when the police interviewed him this afternoon," Angelo said.

"And will the doctor father be grateful when he finds out?" the Old Man asked. "Maybe offer a bonus?"

"He may be more grateful than he knows," Gina said, "but not if he finds out."

"Is that a riddle?" the Old Man asked. He turned to Momma. "Is she asking a riddle?"

"It means that Thom has decided to give up his job at the hospital," Gina said.

"To be a poet?" Marie asked.

"When did he decide that?" Rosetta asked.

"When Charlie called us about the confession," Gina said, "I went over to tell Thom. That's when he told me he plans to sell the flat and use the money to go to college."

"Why?" Marie asked.

"He says he needs a job that will give him enough money to publish his poems himself."

Marie was relieved that artistic integrity remained intact.

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"But," Gina said, "he doesn't want his father to know."

"Why not?" the Old Man said. "A father would be interested in a son who decided to make something of himself. He might even want to help him."

"Ah," Salvatore said, "that's *why* he wouldn't want him to know, Poppa. He would want to do it himself. Am I right?"

"I'm impressed, Sally," Gina said. "Thom says that his father would butt in, give him money, interfere."

"You should tell the father," the Old Man said. "Even if he is a scar doctor. What if he died tomorrow? He would want to know this so he could rest easy."

"We can't tell the father, Poppa," Angelo said. "He's not our client. It wouldn't be ethical."

"But," Gina said, smiling, "we should tell Sandra Summerson about her brother. I can ring her on her telephone at home."

This met with approval around the table.

Then Rosetta said, "If Thom is going to sell his flat . . ."

"He promises he will use Walter to do the conveyancing," Gina said.

"Oh good!" Rosetta said. She clapped her hands. Then she brought herself under control and said, "Of course, it's not just because we're engaged. Walter really *is* very good at his work."

"That's what I told Thom," Gina said.

"Granddad," Marie said.

"What, my dear?" the Old Man said.

"Would you help me after dinner? For school."

"How can I do that?"

"I'm writing an essay for English about your murder case," Marie said. "The one you solved."

"You are?" He beamed. "About Norman Stiles?"

"That's it," Marie said. "Would you mind telling me how you did it again?"

"Well," the Old Man said. "I don't know. It's a pretty violent story for a young lady." He looked to Marie's parents.

Gina gave a tiny nod.

The Old Man said, "Well, if you say 'please' . . ."

"Oh, please, Granddad," Marie said sweetly, winning her minor victory. ●

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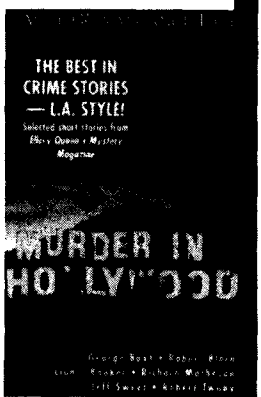

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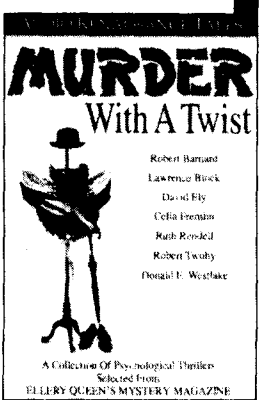

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER TURNBULL

Currently a resident of Leeds, England, Peter Turnbull often sets his stories in Scotland, creating a strong sense of place through carefully reproduced patterns of speech. Like many of the residents of Mr. Turnbull's Glasgow, his detective hero, Inspector Fabian Donoghue, has durability and common sense, as well as a sense of irony . . .

ICEMAN

by PETER TURNBULL

TUESDAY—07:30

Above was the sky, of midsummer early-morning blue, light blue and cloudless, expansive; swallows today darted close to the ground catching the low-flying insects, later in the day they would be wheeling two or three hundred feet above the ground after the day's thermal currents had pushed their prey skywards. But now they skimmed and wheeled on wing tip above the meadow wort and sedge. Below the sky was a rich foliage of green of trees and shrubs and fields in which blackbird and thrush sang. A path of cracked brown soil wound through the landscape and an onlooker would notice first the man, a man in late middle age, a full and pleasant face, a round stomach. The man wore a white shirt with sleeves rolled up and he carried a light summer jacket; he wore white slacks and trainer shoes which, given his years, looked somewhat odd, somewhat out of place. In his other hand he carried a dog chain. The onlooker would also notice a springer spaniel, a mature but youthful dog, trotting contentedly along the path in front of the

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man. Behind, as a backdrop, beyond a belt of golden corn, the grey tower blocks of Airdrie, Lanarkshire.

The man walked away from the tower blocks, in front of him was a vista of green fields beneath a blue sky and a rising sun. The man enjoyed the walk because his dog enjoyed the walk. The man enjoyed the walk with his dog; without his dog, the walk would be without meaning for him. In fact, he doubted if he would have risen early from his bed had it not been for the dog, and so would have missed the best part of the day and the great sense of achievement, which stays with one throughout the day, that an early rise confers. He enjoyed the walk each morning, winter and summer, just as many years earlier he had enjoyed Christmas, only because his children had enjoyed it, tearing open their presents. And he had enjoyed Saltcoats or Burntisland for two weeks a year again only because his children had enjoyed them. Without children he would have hibernated during Christmas week, and without children he would happily have stayed home during the Fair. The man had travelled when younger, when in the army, and now he was no longer young and had long since stopped feeling the so-called wanderlust and wouldn't willingly travel anywhere, save perhaps once every year or two to visit an old friend. But travelling to visit places was a thing of the past. When it came down to it, he wasn't very good at travelling at the best of times. He was of Airdrie and at home in this town. Why, he thought, why travel when you've already arrived?

He walked and kicked a rotten branch off the path. In the distance, but out of sight, was the M8 to and from Edinburgh. He could hear the rumble of the rush-hour traffic. The man was in his late fifties, his dog was eight years old. They were an equivalent age, he and his dog. Two old pals enjoying each other's company.

One man and his dog, in the fields, in the early morning.

The children were up and gone with children of their own. Mrs. Toulson, God rest her, had gone before him, and so now it was just him and Mick and the grandchildren at Sunday lunchtime, two sets leapfrogging each other, Sunday over Sunday.

He walked on. He liked the walk out, but on the way back he couldn't seem to take his eyes off the flat, up there, centre block, twenty-second floor. Mick too seemed to know when the homeward leg had begun, then he would saunter where before he had gambolled.

Jack Toulson swung at a prominent blade of grass with the dog chain; he caught it but the blade bent with the blow and survived.

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He thought, as he had thought before, that his relationship with Mick was deeper, more poignant, more trusting, more pure somehow than the relationships he had had with any human being, even his family, no, especially with his family, with the ups and downs they had had. But him and Mick . . .

He saw the woman close to the path.

He saw her because Mick had seen her, and had stopped as springers will, looking at a quarry, head and tail in a line, front paw raised and bent, pointing. Nothing alarming, Mick did that when he saw a rabbit, but Jack Toulson followed his dog's point, the practice of an ancient relationship between man and beast.

"Ha!" he said, because the first fleeting impression was of a woman lying in the sun, basking in the rays. But the impression was fleeting even before it was an impression, less than a second in fact, as if his brain had wished the impression upon him, so as to deliberately soften the impact of seeing a dead body lying beside a path, and not just any path but *his* path, and there welled up in him a strange sense of resentment that his territory had been violated, and he knew immediately that his walk, the walk belonging to him and Mick, would never be the same. Each morning they would come by this location and think . . . The woman lay on her back, fully clothed, smart clothing too, he saw, evening wear. She lay as if laid out, as Mrs. Toulson had been when he last saw her and had kissed her cheek: arms and legs straight, head face up.

He saw a blue cord round her neck, a cord of strong nylon rope in which was entwined a stick to tighten the cord.

A bird sang.

Traffic rumbled unseen. Traffic on "the top road" could be seen, though heard less than rumbling motorway commuters.

There, all around, life was going on. Here life had been snuffed out, cut off in the bud, for she was still a young woman. He walked up to his dog, caught the collar, and snapped the lead on. He knelt and patted the springer's flank. "We'll need to go and get the polis, you and me, pal," he said.

"Thought she was sunbathing." Jack Toulson cast a glance of horrific fascination over his shoulder and then turned back to Richard King. "I mean, it sounds stupid, but that's what I thought. I know it's a wee bit early in the day for sunbathing but that's the first thought that came into my head. I mean, see women, what they won't do for a tan, and getting out early in a quiet field like this is

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less stupid than laying under one of they sun beds. I look across at the next block some nights and I tell you there's four or five of them on at any one time, especially in the spring because they women don't want to go to Benidorm looking pale, they want to go looking as though they've always been there. They glow blue, do you know, the sun beds at night."

"I know." King looked beyond Jack Toulson to the locus of the crime, uniformed officers, a blue and white ribbon hanging limp in the still air. The corpse, originally thought by the member of the public to be a woman sunbathing, was now covered by a green plastic sheet which lay inside the ribbon.

"Did you go near the body, sir?"

"I told the other officers."

"Tell me."

"Well no, old Mick saw her first."

"Mick?"

"My dog. Didn't you, pal?" Toulson rattled the chain. Mick barked. "He pointed."

"I see." King was not unversed in the ways of the gun dog and having said what he said had then the immediate impression that he had robbed Jack Toulson of the pleasure of explaining what he meant by a dog "pointing."

"But no, I didn't go near. I knew she was dead."

"Oh . . . ?"

Toulson nodded. "I'm an undertaker. I was until I took early retirement. The company was trimming back and they offered me a decent enough package. So I took it. I've got little outgoings now, just me and Mick really."

"I don't see how that means you . . ."

"I could tell, son. See me, I've been in the death business since I was fifteen, that's the best part of half a century. I don't know how I can do it, but I can, I can tell a corpse from a sleeper at some distance, and I knew she was 'off.' "

"Off?"

"Dead. Mick knew too. He wouldn't have pointed at a sleeper. But even without Mick I would have known she was off. Tell you something else, I can look at a living person who looks and feels healthy and I know that they'll be off in six months' time. It's what the death business does to you. So no, I didn't go near. Me and Mick ran back over the fields to the road and dialled three nines at the call box. Didn't we, Mick? Quite a crowd puller."

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"Sorry," said King. He was a chubby, bearded cop, twenty-five years old.

"Yon crowds." Toulson nodded to the end of the path, at the road, where the public had gathered, from where TV cameras were filming the scene. A bus slowed as it drove by, the driver and passengers on both decks peered towards King and Toulson and the uniformed officers and sheet of green plastic: something to talk about at work, something to tune into the news broadcasts for, something to read about in the *Evening Times,* and tomorrow's *Record* and *Herald.*

"It happens." King followed Toulson's gaze. "We call it the 'ogle factor'; wherever there's a really bad pile-up there's always minor accidents surrounding it as drivers ogle instead of keeping their eyes on the road."

"Aye, I can imagine."

"Apart from the body, you saw nothing amiss?" Toulson shook his head. "I wasn't really looking, you see, but no, I saw nothing at all that didn't look right. It was just another morning, particularly fine and pleasant, height of summer. It definitely wasn't there yesterday morning, me and Mick come this way each morning, don't we, Mick?"

King nodded. "She would have been noticed if she had been left there during the day. Plenty of folk cut across these fields and anyway, as you've noticed, she's easily seen from the road. What happened to her happened in the night, that's for sure, and before five A.M. It's dark up until five A.M. I should know, I've been on duty all night."

"Aye, we did shifts at the undertakers. Folk pop into the world at odd times and they don't mind when they go either. I've lifted corpses from houses at two, three A.M. I could never get used to shifts. That's another thing, she was laid out."

King looked at Toulson.

"She was laid out. She didn't die of natural causes, otherwise she would have crumpled, and she wasn't attacked here. She was laid out, somebody took a lot of trouble to lay her out. That's how they were when we picked them up from folks' houses. The doctor calls, certifies death, and lays them out. Then we call and pick them up. They're always in that position. Have to go into the box like that."

"Your employment hasn't affected you, has it?"

"Can't afford to let it, son. It's like going into a supermarket, it's easy to pick a joint of beef off the shelf, but behind it is a man who's prepared to kill and cut up the cow. Graveyards are pleasant and

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tranquil places but behind each one is a man or men who are prepared to work with corpses."

"Still couldn't do your job," said King.

"And I couldn't do yours. Anyway, yon was laid out."

"You didn't see anybody else about?"

Jack Toulson shook his head. "Not here in the fields. I did see one or two folk in the street after I left the flats, but just the usual, the milkman, the postie. After I made the call I stayed at the start of the path and stopped a lassie from taking her own dog down, told her there was a body all laid out and the polis were on their way."

"Then?"

"Then I identified myself to the officers and offered to show them the corpse, but they told me to direct them instead, which I did. They came back pretty quickly and took a plastic sheet and a roll of tape from the boot of their car. Then they went back down the path and asked me to wait to speak to you."

It was one of those rare occasions when the telephone did not awaken her. It was one of those rare occasions when she did not have to pretend to be asleep when her husband, disturbed from his slumber by the softly purring phone, had groped for the handset, pulled it under the duvet, and murmured, "Reynolds." It was one of those occasions when she could enjoy rising with her husband and see him off to work. Conventionally wifely. Perhaps she thought it was the sort of action likely to invite scathing comments from feminists, but nonetheless, she found it hugely enjoyable, hugely rewarding; wifely.

Janet Reynolds suffered insomnia. That is to say that throughout her early life she had seen herself as a "sufferer" of that condition. Now in her early thirties, she had long referred to herself as "benefitting" from the condition. It gave her more waking hours in each twenty-four than is enjoyed by the average person. Once her attitude had changed, she began to use the time to study, consume vast novels, learn foreign languages.

"Yes . . ." Reynolds continued to talk as his slender wife slid out of bed and opened the curtains.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Please . . . no, sorry . . . carry on, I was speaking to my wife . . . Airdrie? Very well. It may take an hour from now. I'm coming from Pollokshields in the rush hour. But I'll be there as quick as I can."

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In the kitchen his wife smiled at him in her housecoat. The room smelled of toast and percolated coffee.

"Got to have something inside you. You've always said that."

"Certainly, have to." Reynolds slid into his jacket. "The human body is an engine and all engines need food. Oh . . . the first cup of coffee in the morning . . . heaven . . . we're all allowed our addictions, even members of the medical profession."

"Two slices?"

"Please. Where's Gustav?"

"I let him out, he's in the garden with a bone. Why?"

"No reason, just that he usually shares my toast."

"Going to Airdrie?"

"Aye, but that's where these things tend to happen. In Milngavie and Bearsden and points north and west, they use solicitors to spill blood, out east they use knives."

"Oh, unfair on the good people of the east, I'd say. Toast, two slices for the consumption of. I mean, speaking as a lassie from Tollcross, that is."

"Point taken, but that's just the way it seems. Still, we'll see what we find. Every corpse tells a story, and no two stories are ever the same."

"And what do you know about this story?"

"Adult female, strangled with a ligature. Seems straightforward, but you never know. I have the easy job, it's the poor old polis that fight in the trenches—who she is, why she was murdered, by whom; rather them than me. Right, I'll see you when I see you."

King kept a respectful distance as Reynolds knelt by the corpse, peeled back the sheet, and conducted a preliminary examination. Occasionally he scribbled a note on his pad. Behind King were the three blocks of high-rise flats, at the living room window of each stood a person, or a couple, or a family, each unknown to the others, all the way to the twenty-fifth floor, each staring down at the unfolding drama in the field in the middle distance. A movement to King's right caught his eye. He turned and watched a plum-coloured Rover sliding to a halt beside the flashing blue lights of Tango Delta Foxtrot, which less than one hour previously had responded to Jack Toulson's three nines call and then radioed in a Code 41. King watched as Donoghue got out of his car. He was, to King's eyes, immaculately dressed in a light grey suit. Donoghue paused to light his pipe and then began to walk along the footpath towards the

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locus. King knew what would happen. Donoghue would approach, nod in response to the salute of the senior constable, stand next to King, fix him with eye contact, and then raise one eyebrow. King knew the script and began to rehearse his lines.

Donoghue approached. A sudden zephyr, short-lived as it was sudden, carried a whiff of his tobacco smoke before him. King nodded to Donoghue as Donoghue approached and raised an eyebrow.

"Female deceased, sir, adult white European. Dr. Reynolds, as you see, is at the locus, he's just arrived, in fact. The deceased was found by a member of the public when he was walking his dog. Ligature round the neck of deceased indicates murder by strangulation. I have not looked for identification yet."

"I see." Donoghue pulled on his pipe and watched Reynolds slip the sheet over the body and stand.

Reynolds turned away from the corpse and walked to where Donoghue and King stood. "Mr. Donoghue."

"Dr. Reynolds, good morning."

"A fine day for it." Reynolds brushed dirt from his hands. "A fine sunny morning and in the country. Usually it's a scheme in February."

"What can you tell us, sir?"

"I can tell you a lot. And I can tell you little. I can tell you that she is deceased, possibly murdered."

"The ligature . . . ?" King interrupted. "I . . ."

"A smoke screen, gentlemen, and as such that does suggest foul play, though that's your department, but it is not a very good smoke screen. The preliminary examination always gives a cascade of information, so, point by point, and not in any order of importance, the first thing that I have to tell you, she wasn't strangled. The rope round her neck is nylon, quite strong enough to strangle her, but the stick in the rope is rotten: it would have snapped in twain had any pressure been applied to it. My guess is that it was picked up from hereabouts and shoved in the rope as an afterthought before the felons made their getaway."

"Felons?"

"I'll come to that. But I can immediately discard strangulation as a cause of death. If she had been strangled by the rope, or by a pair of meaty hands, there would be massive bruising about the neck which would have remained after death. It takes living tissue to make bruising subside. A corpse can be bruised, especially if death is recent, but only living tissue can recover from bruising. I would

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also expect there to be other indications of strangulation: bleeding from the ears, and a congestion of blood in the face, giving the face a puffed-out and mottled appearance. There is none of that. Further, I would have expected there to be collateral damage to the hands, caused when she fought off her attacker, or bruising to her wrists caused by her being restrained prior to or during strangulation."

"None of that?"

"Not a mark upon her that I can see. Further, her clothing is not in disarray, which I would have expected had she met a violent death. The problem now encountered is that I can't guess her time of death. The body is too cold."

"Cold?"

"It's frozen. Literally. In fact, there is evidence that it's thawing rapidly. There is ice under the lips and still small particles of ice in the hair. They would not occur normally, given the time of year. My guess is they brought her here in the night in a deep-frozen state and she immediately began to thaw. The nights are warm, top soil retains heat and has been heated by two weeks of very hot weather. Once the sun rose the thawing became rapid. In fact, the soil under the corpse is a little damp."

"So." Donoghue pulled on his pipe. "She was placed here in the night, but could have been murdered . . . ?"

"Ten years ago."

"Ten years ago!"

"Or twenty, or ten days ago. What I can tell you is that she didn't freeze to death. There's no frostbite on the extremities; frostbite is caused by a living body fighting to keep itself warm. The lady here, she died instantly, at least quickly. And she was deep-frozen immediately after death. Once on ice at a sufficiently low temperature, no biological degradation will occur. It's that very principle that causes lunatic Americans to have their bodies deep-frozen upon natural death so that when in two hundred years' time scientists have found a cure for heart disease or whatever, the body can be thawed out, revived, and repaired. Any scientist will tell you that that is complete nonsense, quite impossible, because if we could cure heart disease we could only cure it before the long goodbye and not after. But that doesn't stop Yanks with more money than sense having their earthly remains frozen. Anyway, I'll take her back to the G.R.I. Look at her heart, that'll point me in the right direction. I'd put her age at death as being about thirty years. She was a natural brown-haired woman, but her hair was dyed blond."

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"She died blond," said King. "They have more fun."

Donoghue glared at him.

"Sorry, sir," mumbled King. "Not in the best taste."

"Unlike you, too," Donoghue said. "Not the sort of crack I'd expect from you."

"But it gives an insight into her lifestyle," said Reynolds quickly. "A woman who liked the good life. Her clothing doesn't come from Paddy's Market and she has some serious rocks on her fingers, held there by some serious metals. But, once again, I venture into your territory."

"Venture all you like, Dr. Reynolds." Donoghue looked at his pipe, verifying that it had indeed gone out.

"She was, or at least had been, married."

"The rings you mentioned?" Donoghue lit his pipe.

"In absentia," Reynolds nodded. "In their case, *in absentia.* Whether she removed those two particular rings upon divorce, or whether they were taken from her upon death in an attempt to disguise her identity as another form of smoke screen is for you gentlemen to find out. But nonetheless, second finger, left hand, clear impression of two rings having been in constant presence. But, whatever, with your permission I'll have the body removed to the G.R.I. and commence the postmortem."

"Could you let us have the clothing as soon as possible?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks. Oh, Dr. Reynolds, you mentioned felons."

"In the plural, yes, I did. Just a common-sense observation really, just that one person can dispose of the body of another more easily if it is pliable, if it can be folded up into the boot of a car, for example. But in this case, the deceased was stiff as a length of wood and covered in ice. Difficult for one person to manhandle on his own, no sign of her being dragged along the path, though in fairness the ground is concrete hard, little if any trace would be left. Yet again I find myself moving into your territory. The other thing that occurs to me is that in order to freeze a corpse you would need access to an industrial-scale refrigeration plant. She was a tall woman, five ten I measured, it's not the sort of freezing job you can do at home, and that would seem to imply conspiracy. But if you'll excuse me, I'll carry on. I'll phone the results to you at P Division and fax the complete report as soon as I've written it."

"Thank you, sir. Richard."

"Yes, sir."

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"A sweep of this entire area, around the locus but especially from the locus to the road and anywhere where a motor vehicle would have parked. I don't know what you're looking for, but you'll know it when you see it. I'll leave that in your capable hands."

"Very good, sir."

"Sounds good," said the woman, high cheekbones, blue eyes, natural blond hair tied up in a bun. "I read the reviews and I haven't been to live theatre for long enough."

"Most cops don't like the theatre." The man stood with an upright posture, balancing his weight evenly between two slightly spread feet. "Their day-to-day life is endless street theatre, they get all the drama they can use at work, but occasionally, once in a blue moon . . ."

"Listen, I said I'd love to go . . ." The phone rang. The woman picked it up. "Uniform bar . . . Yes sir, he's here." She handed the phone to the man. "It's a slave driver, for you."

"Oh . . . and I was hoping for a quiet day, what's this going to be about?"

"It'll be the Code Forty-one that came in this morning, right at the beginning of the day shift. Go on, take it, he's waiting."

"Detective Sergeant Sussock . . . Yes, right away." He put down the phone. "See that guy, he's young enough to be my son and no wonder he's got so far so fast. The job, the job, and nothing but the job."

"On you go, old Sussock, and stop your carping."

Sussock leaned forward and stole a kiss.

"Ray!"

Sussock shrugged.

"Look, I'm angry." She looked quickly about her. "We made an agreement, a contract. We said we'd keep this discreet. If you do that again, we're finished. I'm not a bloody tart to be pecked at in public."

"There's nobody about," said Sussock meekly.

"How do you know, how do you know? Working here's like living in a village. Nothing goes unnoticed."

"I wouldn't have done it if I thought there was even the slightest . . ."

"On you go, Fabian's waiting. And I'm going to think again about that theatre date."

"Elka . . ."

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The phone rang. She snatched it up. "Uniform bar. WPC Willems speaking . . . Yes, if you'll just give me the details, madam . . ."

Sussock went upstairs to the CID corridor and tapped reverently on Donoghue's door.

"Come," Donoghue said after an imperious pause. He looked up and smiled as Sussock entered his office. "Oh, Ray, thanks for coming up, take a pew."

"Thanks."

"You look upset, Ray?"

"It's nothing. Just wish I hadn't done something, that's all."

"So join the rest of humanity, Ray. We all have regrets like that. All we can do is learn from them, use them to help us proceed onwards and upwards, that's the ticket, ever onwards, ever upwards."

"Aye." Sussock sank into the "pew," unable to share Donoghue's spirited enthusiasm. It seemed that a lifetime of regrets had brought him here, sinking into a chair in front of the desk of a man twenty years his junior and feeling just as battered and misshapen as his trilby, which, if memory served him, was itself secondhand when he bought it from a charity shop. Or was that the winter fedora? Could have been the fedora he used in wintertime . . .

Donoghue leaned back in his chair and pulled Sussock's wandering mind back to reality. "You may have heard that we have a murder inquiry in progress. I'm anxious to keep up the momentum."

"Of course, sir. What do we have?"

And Donoghue told him in a leisurely manner, pausing at times to relight his pipe, which seemed to refuse to kindle. All very rich, thought Sussock, who, if he recalled, had been summoned as a matter of urgency. "So that's it, Ray. She was iced up and now she's thawed out, cause of death to be determined, just thought I'd put you in the picture, since you're on the day shift."

"Aye." Sussock shifted his position in the chair and glanced out of the window at the sun glinting off the angular concrete and glass buildings of Sauchiehall Street.

"I've asked the collator to press a couple of buttons on his computer of which he is so proud to come up with the names of female m.p.'s of about thirty years of age."

"Aye." Sussock fidgeted with his hat. "The deceased, now, how tall would she be?"

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"Five ten approx. You said that as though you know something, Ray."

"I could well. You know, it might be worth asking the collator to search for female m.p.'s of about forty-five years. He could alternatively search for a file in the name of Reissmann."

"Tell me more."

"She disappeared eighteen months ago. I remember it because it was allocated to me. It's still unsolved. It's that my ears pricked up when you mentioned that she had been kept in a frozen state. Her husband is in the refrigeration business. He's fond of calling himself 'Reissmann the Iceman.' "

"Ray, you interest me. No, you don't, you intrigue me."

"He owns a refrigerated warehouse. Food distributers rent refrigerated storage space from him. He also has a government contract, keeps deep-frozen meat as part of the EEC meat mountain, so-called."

"What manner of man is he?"

"A bit like a pub landlord. Flashy dresser, gold-crown smile for everyone, but the slightest thing annoys him, at which point he turns into the human equivalent of a rattlesnake, except you don't get the warning rattle before he strikes. I didn't take to him. I don't wish to be unkind to publicans, but that's the way I felt about the guy. You know the feeling you get. I felt all the time that there was more to his wife's disappearance than he was letting on. He overacted a bit, too much of the anxiety and concerned partner."

"Did you quiz him?"

"Aye, we did that right enough. Hard enough, too. Gave his house and garden a good going-over with the sniffer dogs, kept him in the cells overnight. Had to let him go because of lack of evidence. I remember him looking pleased, as though he believed that he'd got away with something. I very nearly told him we'd see each other again but I kept it zipped; I didn't want him to cover too many tracks. I felt it was in our interests to let him think he'd got away with it; you know how it is, opening your mouth makes you feel good at the time but at the end of the day you're just digging a hole."

"Shrewd, Ray. Because we all know what happens to people who dig holes." Donoghue leaned forward and picked up the phone on his desk. He dialled a two-figure internal number. "Collator . . . DI Donoghue . . . The search I asked you to do for female m.p.'s of about thirty years, I'd like you to widen it to include female m.p.'s of about forty-five years, and if it throws up the name Reissmann

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. . . R—E—I—S—S—M—A—N—N, then that's the file we want to see first. . . . I'll ask. . . . Ray, what was the lady's first name?"

Sussock clicked his fingers. "Shirley . . . Cindy . . . Susan . . . began with an 'S,' sorry."

"The initial 'S,' " Donoghue said. "There can't be too many missing Reissmanns of about forty-five years, it's not what you'd call a common name . . . but I think you could use some common sense. If there are two files on people called Reissmann bring them both up here." He replaced the phone. "New man, keen as mustard but little imagination. Where were we?"

"Mrs. Reissmann."

"Did you search the business premises."

Sussock shook his head. "No, no we didn't. When we drew a blank we requested advice from the Home Office major local enquiry computer, and it sent back a printout advising us to check outbuildings, cellars, and drains."

"And?"

"He owns a large house in Busby, close to his warehouse; we had already checked the outbuildings and so we left. The house has no cellarage, there was nothing blocking the drains, we lifted the floorboards, again nothing. But there was something. You know, I was watching Reissmann when the boys were lifting the carpets and the floorboards and again he acted, he pretended to be indignant, but beyond the indignation was a sense of smugness, his mouth was making the sort of noise you'd expect, but his eyes were saying, You won't find her down there."

"Ray, I look to you for guidance. I think your m.p. has been found, and found deceased, as are most m.p.'s who don't turn up within forty-eight hours."

Sussock sat back in his chair. "I'd be inclined to go and talk to her mother."

"Her mother?"

"Aye. They were very close. Mrs. Reissmann was forty-five, her mother was eighteen when she was born. The mother is still only in her sixties. Very much alive, and was convinced that Reissmann did her daughter in."

"Motive?"

"She couldn't have children. At least one of them couldn't and he blamed her apparently. As I recall, Mrs. Reissmann had had all the tests done and had even undergone exploratory operations to see if anything was blocked inside. She got a clean bill of health each

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time. He, on the other hand, would have no tests done and persisted with the insistence that the problem lay with her. Her mother reckons he filled her in so as to replace her with a younger model who could provide him with a son and heir to his empire."

"His empire being a warehouse in Busby." Donoghue laid his pipe in the ashtray. "Ray, it's lunchtime. Grab some feed and then go and see Mrs. Reissmann's—"

A knock on the door.

"Come in . . . ah . . . good man."

"The files you requested, sir." The collator handed Donoghue a number of files. "Only one Reissmann forty-five years of age, Sandra by name."

"Sandra." Sussock stood. "That's it. Sandra Reissmann."

"Thank you. As I said, Ray. Grab some fodder and then go and have a chat to Sandra Reissmann's mother. I'll familiarise myself with the file."

"It was the doctors at the hospital who eventually said no." The woman ground a nail into the ashtray. Behind her, out of her kitchen window, three floors up, Sussock could see the black tenements of Shettleston. "See, our Sandra, my wee girl, she'd nae life wi' him. He blamed her all the time for no getting pregnant and she got to thinking she was to blame, and she had these operations to see if anything was blocked inside but it wisnae and it all just made her weak and ill. The doctors had a fancy way of putting it, what did they say, 'We're undermining her health,' that's what they said. She was badgered into having more tests and operations by that monster, and it was the doctor who eventually said, 'Look, hen, it's no you. There's nothing wrong with you, it must be your man.' He didn't take kindly to that and he threw a maddy so he did, but he wouldn't go and get himself tested, not our Mr. Reissmann the Iceman with a smile for everybody and a knife in each hand, also for everybody. See, my nice wee angel with him and him so much older than her. He's nearly as old as me so he is. I don't know what she saw in him but she must have thought, 'Here I am a woman of thirty with nae man, I'd best grab what I can,' and she grabbed him. She was a bonny lass and could have done better than him; maybe she couldn't stop thinking that I was married from a gymslip and a mother at eighteen. I was divorced when I was twenty-three right enough, but, aye . . . so you've found my wee girl, aye, Mr. . . ."

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"Sussock. Yes, I'm afraid we believe we have. At some point we may ask you to identify her."

"But no just yet."

"No."

"She's not being cut up!"

"Her face won't be touched."

"Oh, Sandra . . ."

"We have to determine the cause of death. It's vital we do that, we can't proceed unless we do that."

"No, I suppose . . . So how can I help you?" She lit another cigarette. Sussock coughed. "Does this bother you?"

"Just a wee bit, my chest . . ."

"Oh, aye, well it's my daughter. I knew she was dead, eighteen months with no word from my wee girl when she's the one to phone you every day . . . could only mean she was dead . . . but aye . . . your chest . . . I'll make this the last one."

"I'm obliged."

"Perhaps we'll make it the last one. See how I feel. So how can I help you?"

"When did you last see your daughter?"

"See her to speak to, see . . . Wait here, will you, Mr. Sussock?"

Mrs. Gallagher stood, a pale, thin woman, and seemed to Sussock to scurry out of the kitchen, the sides of her slippers sticking briefly to the tacky vinyl floor. Sussock waved his arm in an attempt to clear the smoke. Mrs. Gallagher returned too soon for comfort for Sussock's lungs.

"See, me, son. I keep a diary. Always have done. Do you want to know what I was doing twenty-five years ago, name a day and I can tell you. All my diaries are next door in my room."

"No, I just want to know when you last saw your daughter."

The woman flicked over the pages of a pocket diary. "I marked it, so I did. Aye . . . aye . . . here we are, Tuesday, February second, last year. I recall it well; she said her man was acting strange and had started talking about children again. I said, 'Again!' See, all the operations she had were done before she was thirty-five, after that they just stopped trying, and he didn't mention children again. Then he started talking about wanting a son and he was getting cold and distant towards her. But he was keen to take her for a meal that Saturday, so she phoned and said she was going to Loon Fung Restaurant, Chinese, but really posh. Anyway, she didn't phone the day after, so in the evening I phoned her. Her man said she was no there,

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she'd gone to visit me. I knew then something was wrong, because she didn't drive and would have had to travel from Busby to Shettleston on a bus in winter, Sunday service at that, and last winter was a bad one."

"I recall," said Sussock, his lungs hurting.

"So next day when she still hadn't phoned, I told him to report her missing."

"You told him?"

"Insisted. So I did." She dogged the nail and to Sussock's relief didn't reach for another. "I did some wee checking. I phoned the restaurant and the owner told me that they were there, sounded embarrassed. Said Mr. and Mrs. Reissmann had attended the restaurant and Mrs. Reissmann had been taken ill. He was a very polite Chinese gentleman, so I said, 'How?' and he said she had fallen down, and I said, 'Oh my God, did Sandra have a drink in her?' and he said that she did. That's the strangest thing because Sandra's a dried-out alcoholic. She can't afford to touch a drop, once she gets the taste in her, and her man kept her off, he did that for her, but the reason he did that was to help her get pregnant, at least in the early days. So here, he takes her to a restaurant and plies her with drink. It just doesn't add up and deliver."

"Can I take a note of the date they went to the restaurant?" Sussock took his pad from his pocket.

"Saturday second February. The Loon Fung. Top of Maryhill Road, almost in Bearsden. But I told all this to the polis that called on Monday fourth February," she added, checking her diary. "See here, Monday, polis called about Sandra." Mrs. Gallagher toyed with the butts in the ashtray. "You'll be arresting him?"

"Arresting who?"

"Reissmann the Iceman, everybody's wee pal. He murdered my wee angel, so he did."

"Oh?"

"Had to. He wanted a son, started to want a son again, after stopping trying for ten years. He had a notion and so he had to trade my wee angel in for another bit of stuff. After all they'd tried before, by then she was too old, and divorce is just not his style. Too costly, and he's a good man with a knife."

Sussock noticed a slight glint in her eye. He thought the woman was about to tell him something. He said so.

"I met him through my man. They were laid up in Barlinnie together. My second man, that is."

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"He's got form?"

"Aye. He did two years for malicious wounding, carved a boy up good, they say. But it's not what the polis wanted him for."

"No?"

"No. They wanted him for the murder of his first wife. There was a scuffle on the bridge, they say, you know the wee suspension bridge near The Green, that bridge. It was dark, a winter's night, not many witnesses, but a couple did say it was a lassie struggling with a man. But no one was close enough to see which man and she went into the water so she did, when it was close to zero. So he walked, after a 'not proven' verdict. He married our Sandra a year later. And see, the wedding, it was in January. Reissmann, see him, it's more than his line of work that makes folk call him the Iceman. He's got this thing about ice and snow. You married, Mr. Sussock?"

Sussock stood. "Separated. We live apart. Thank you for your time."

"Separated," sighed Mrs. Gallagher. "Best way."

Donoghue listened attentively, pressing the phone to the side of his head, and scribbled as he listened. Then he said, "Ray, that's a good bit of work. Come back in and we'll go and see Reissmann together." He replaced the phone and picked it up instantly and punched a two-figure internal number. "Collator, can you let me have another file on Reissmann? Yes, same name, this time it's a male about sixty-five years of age, he'll have track for malicious wounding and a charge of murder. Now, yes please." He replaced the phone. It rang as soon as he put it down. "Is there no rest . . ." He snatched it up. "DI Donoghue."

"Reynolds, G.R.I. here."

"Ah, Dr. Reynolds, excellent."

"I've completed the p.m. on the young lady I first saw in a field this morning. Not so young in fact. I'll have the report written up and faxed to you, but I thought you'd like to know the nuts and bolts ASAP."

"Certainly would."

"Well, you know the nice thing about ice is that it can work for us as well as against us. I can't tell you when she was murdered but her last moments of life have been frozen for us, a time bracket of a few hours, captured forever, or until she started to thaw. Well, her age: after examination I'd say she was in her mid forties. I dissected a tooth, that gives the most accurate reading of age. The

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age I estimated this morning was an appearance diagnosis. She just looked younger than she was. She hadn't been aged by childbearing, though not for want of trying, going by the operation scars on her abdomen."

"That accords with our findings."

"Well, in her last hour of life, she consumed a Chinese meal, bean shoots by the look of it, and she consumed large quantities of alcohol, still frozen in her blood, and she died from carbon monoxide poisoning, also still frozen in her bloodstream. But exactly when . . ."

"It happened on the night of Saturday second, Sunday third February last year. Sandra Reissmann was reported missing on the Monday after she was seen in a Chinese restaurant on the Saturday evening badly under the influence of alcohol."

"It all begins to fit together," Reynolds said. "It's my guess that she lay slumped in the rear of the car comatose with alcohol and was allowed to inhale the exhaust fumes of the car. If the car was left in an enclosed space like a garage, or had a pipe running from the exhaust to the interior of the car, death would be rapid, within fifteen minutes, probably much less. Her body was then laid out and deep-frozen. Can't imagine why anyone would want to go to those lengths, keep her in a deep-frozen state, hidden for eighteen months, and then leave her in the open, with a daft smoke screen of a rope round her neck and a rotten stick, allegedly used to twist it. That's really your department, but to me it smacks of somebody panicking."

"Doesn't it just." Donoghue smiled. "Could be useful to us, very useful indeed."

"He's not here, sorry. Can I help you?"

"Can I ask who you are, please?"

"If I can ask who you gentlemen are?"

Donoghue smiled. "Quite right, sorry, we should have introduced ourselves." He showed the woman his ID. "DI Donoghue and this is DS Sussock."

"Oh, I'm Mrs. Joyce, the under manager." Donoghue thought the woman to have an honest face and Sussock was grateful she didn't smoke. Her office had glass windows and looked out onto endless banks of white freezers. Men in smocks drove forklift trucks or pulled a chain of trollies behind electrically powered tugs. "Mr. Reissmann has gone home, he complained of the heat."

"The heat! It's quite cold in here really."

"Oh, Mr. Reissmann has a poor tolerance of heat."

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"I see," said Donoghue. "So this is what a refrigerated warehouse looks like?"

"Certainly is." Mrs. Joyce looked pleased in a genuine, proud manner, so thought Donoghue, a humility which induced pride about something that to others might seem matter of fact, pleased about a job that others would resent or view as tedious. "We rent out freezer space by the cubic metre, we have two million cubic metres of freezer space."

"Business good?"

"Booming. The food industry has survived the recession, as it does every recession."

"People have to eat."

"Exactly. In fact, Mr. Reissmann has told me to fill the tubs."

"Tubs?"

"Freezers. We call them 'tubs.' Mr. Reissmann has told me to fill the tubs beyond the makers' recommended limits. If you overfill a fridge it reduces its efficiency."

"I'm aware of that. They also need defrosting. I presume that this is what is going on down there, third line of tubs at the bottom of the shed."

Mrs. Joyce followed Donoghue's gaze to where three young men appeared to be chopping at ice with small axes. "Yes, in fact that tub hasn't been used for nearly two years now. Mr. Reissmann hung an Out of Order sign on it, which happens from time to time, but he usually has them repaired within a matter of hours. That one he seemed to forget about. Then he put a lock on it, a wee padlock. We couldn't understand that, there we were turning away business and overfilling tubs and there's a tub sitting there doing nothing, twenty foot long, six feet wide, and four feet deep."

"Really?" said Donoghue. "Really?"

"Aye, and to tell you the truth there was some talk among the crew. Mr. Reissmann's wife, she disappeared some months ago, and the gossip was that she was in there, but it was only gossip, see she was seen after the tub was taken out of use."

"She was?"

"Aye. That tub went out of use on the day my son got married, two years ago last month. I'm a grandmother now."

"Congratulations."

"Aye, well, the tub had an Out of Order sign hung on it in the June, and Mrs. Reissmann didn't go missing until the winter, about January I think."

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"When did the padlock appear on the tub?"

"About the same . . . oh . . ." Mrs. Joyce paled.

"What are those lads doing to the tub?"

"Well . . . as you see, chopping at the ice to speed up the defrosting. When it's defrosted we'll drain it and let it freeze up again. Same process as domestic fridges."

"But you haven't drained it yet?"

"No. We came in this morning and Mr. Reissmann was there, started early. The lid was up, and it was defrosting. It had been empty . . . well . . . we get a slack period after lunch so I asked the boys to start chopping the ice, better than having them standing around."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Drain it," said Donoghue. "Don't drain it; in fact, take the crew off and refreeze it. And then leave it."

"Oh . . ."

"There's a gentleman we know, we'd like him to have a look at the ice, or maybe what's in the ice. The sort of thing that you or I might not even notice, but would tell him a whole story. Please, freeze it, put the lid down, and leave it."

"Yes . . . yes . . . of course . . ."

The house said new money. Long, squat, light sandstone under red tile, clipped lawn, imitation stagecoach lamps each side of an imitation oak door. An ice-blue sports car stood in the drive looking like a thoroughbred with an impeccable pedigree from Italy or Germany but on closer inspection proved to be made in Japan. Donoghue halted his Rover behind the Japanese imitation but remained in his seat. Sussock glanced at him questioningly.

"Let's let caution be our watchword, Ray. It occurred to me that Mr. Reissmann, who evidently keeps his house 'just so' like this house is, would be the sort of man who keeps the company of rottweilers."

"Nothing moving."

"Very well, let's pay our respects, but proceed with caution."

The doorbell sounded the Westminster chimes. It was opened on the second ring by a young woman. She wore a short cheesecloth shirt over a yellow bikini, bronzed endless pins stopped in yellow high heels. She had a yellow band in her hair. She wore sunglasses.

"Sunny inside, is it, miss?" said Donoghue. The woman's hand went involuntarily up to her sunglasses. "I . . . er . . . I'm on the sun

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bed," she stuttered, but the excuse sounded hollow to both cops. "Can I . . ."

"Police."

"Oh!"

"You sound surprised."

"I . . . Mr. Reissmann's by the pool. . . ."

"Very interesting, but who said we wished to speak with him?" Donoghue thought the woman to be nineteen, maybe twenty.

"I thought . . . the police . . . I mean . . . well, it's his house. . . ." Then the woman calmed and gathered herself. "Mr. Reissmann is by the pool, I'll tell him you're here. If you'd wait here." She turned and walked away, wobbling on too-high heels on deep pile carpet.

"One frightened young lady, I'd say, Ray."

"Oh, I think so, sir, I think so. Someone with a tale to tell."

The two cops waited by the door. The house, so far as they could tell, was as Donoghue had said: "just so," everything neatly in its place, the sort of house where the books, if there were books at all, would be arranged with the ones with the tallest spines at the ends of the shelves, sinking down to those with the shortest spines in the centre of the shelves. Donoghue had been in such houses. Gentle, superficial music played from somewhere, irritating, all-pervading, as in a modern bar.

Presently the woman returned. It seemed to both cops that she was still nervous. She still wore the sunglasses. "Mr. Reissmann will see you now."

Donoghue thought, Damn right he will, but said coldly, "That's good of him."

The woman led the way through the house. The cops' initial impression was not belied by the walk. New furniture, fitted carpets, all very "new money," everything still in its place and the irritating music filling the house.

Reissmann sat beside a large indoor pool. The woman stopped at the entrance to the swimming pool, said, "Mr. Reissmann," turned, and departed.

"Gentlemen," Reissmann said with a glinting smile. He remained inclined on a wooden poolside chair, dressed in yellow trunks. Donoghue noted him to be a small man, with a swarthy complexion, muscular, and suffering from a chronic hirsute state which appeared not to cause him to be self-conscious. He made no attempt to hide the mass of hair which covered his body from neck to ankles; his swimming trunks were, to the cops, distastefully brief for a man

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of his years. A metal champagne bucket stood beside the chair; it contained ice cubes and was three-quarters empty. Reissmann had ice cubes on his head, his chest, and stomach. "Can I help you?"

"I do hope so, Mr. Reissmann. My name's DI Donoghue and this is . . ."

"Detective Sergeant Sussock, we've met."

The steel-cold smile was fixed. "It cost me a lot of money to repair the damage you had your men do to my house."

"Well, we won't have to do that again, Mr. Reissmann," said Donoghue. "Mr. Reissmann, we believe we have found your wife. She still has to be identified, but that I feel will be a formality."

"Is she dead?" Reissmann's jaw sagged and Donoghue knew immediately what Sussock had that morning meant about Reissmann's tendency to overact. It just didn't come off.

"She was found in a field in Airdrie, by a man walking his dog."

"Sandra . . . how dreadful . . . , but you know, after eighteen months, I began to fear the worst so you've not surprised me. She had no reason to leave. Things were not too bad between us. How did she die, exposure?"

"No. She was murdered."

"Murdered! How? Strangled?"

"No, but it is interesting that you should say that."

"Well, I just thought that most women are strangled, I mean those that are murdered . . . you know, hands around the neck, length of rope . . . that's normal, isn't it?"

"No. It's not normal. Most female victims of murder are battered to death or knifed. It's either the famous blunt instrument or a regular kitchen knife that accounts for most murders, male or female."

"Perhaps I've been watching too many detective films."

"Perhaps you have."

Reissmann dipped a paw into the metal bucket and scooped up a fistful of ice cubes and laid them on his scalp. A second fistful was distributed on his chest and stomach. "Some like it hot," he said, "but only some." He tested the weight of the bucket and looked up at Sussock. "Would you do me a wee favour?"

"Perhaps," said Sussock after a pause.

"Could you press the button there. On the wall." Sussock did so. A bell rang far off in the recesses of the house.

"It rings in the kitchen." Reissmann smiled. "That's where she'll be."

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"She?"

"The girl, Rosie. She'll be in the kitchen. I need more ice, Rosie will bring it. She knows what that bell's for. —So our Sandra. She's dead right enough, aye?"

"She is. You don't seem so upset."

"Aye well, like I said, after eighteen months there can only be one result. —Where's that girl?"

"Where were you this morning?"

"This morning?"

"This morning."

"Slept late. Got up at ten. Went up to the warehouse, worked till lunchtime."

"Not bad for a businessman."

"The warehouse is doing well, ticking along nicely, and it always will while people need food. I came back to keep cool by the pool. Could you press the bell again?"

Sussock did so, but only after a pause.

"See, women. She knew I was running out of ice."

"She's probably on the sun bed."

"We don't have one. Wouldn't allow one in the house."

"Interesting," said Donoghue.

"Why?"

"Nothing, nothing. Tell me, what is your relationship with the girl, Rosie?"

"Is that anything to do with you?"

"Yes. I think it is. Since your wife's death is of what we term suspicious circumstances, everything to do with you is something to do with me. So, the girl?"

"We have a relationship."

"A relationship?"

"A man needs a woman. Sandra didn't seem to be coming back. Can't get married; Sandra can't be presumed dead, officially, that is, for another six months. But there's a formality, marriage I mean, you can do everything you want to do without a ring and a certificate. We're trying for a family."

"Anybody with you in the house this morning?"

"Rosie. Rosie was with me all the time. You can ask her."

"We will."

"She'll be in the kitchen. She's a good girl." Reissmann plunged his hand into the pail. "See, I can touch the bottom now. I need ice, see women, they're useless. Press the bell, pal."

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"No," said Sussock.

Reissmann glared at him. Then forced a smile. But it was too late, the glare had been a flash of insight into Reissmann's nature and both cops had seen it. He levered himself effortlessly out of the chair and jabbed the bell.

"Do you know anybody who'd want to harm your wife?"

"No, right! No!" He sank back in the chair and looked with a look almost akin to disbelief at the few remaining cubes of ice in the pail. "I can't believe this. Do I have to fetch my own ice now?"

"There's just you and Rosie in the house?"

"Aye. Mind you, you'd think I was on my own." He banged the pail down hard on the tiles. "Women!"

"You're not planning to go anywhere, are you, Mr. Reissmann?"

"No. Why?"

"Because," said Donoghue, "we'll be back to have another chat."

"Oh yes. About what?"

"About your wife's murder. Let's just say that right now we want to meet as many people as possible."

"By means of introduction," added Sussock.

"I know how you work. You know fine well I've got a wee history. Talk about giving a dog a bad name."

"We'll go and talk to Rosie," Donoghue said calmly, "then we'll see ourselves out."

"Tell her I want some ice."

"We'll ask her. When we've finished speaking to her, of course."

The kitchen was empty. A half-drunk mug of coffee stood on the table in front of an open magazine. On the working surface a coffee percolator bubbled and hissed.

"Sort of reminds you of the nursery rhyme," Sussock said. "You know the one, 'Who's been sitting in my chair?' "

"More like the *Marie Celeste* if you ask me," Donoghue replied, surveying the kitchen. "Pity, I would have liked to have spoken to her. We didn't get her surname. We'll either see her soon or not at all. My guess, not at all. She's cleared the pitch. I bet she saw all this coming and had a running-away pack all made up ready to grab and go."

The bell rang angrily, loudly jarring the ears of Donoghue and Sussock.

"Let's go, Ray. Leave Mr. Reissmann the Iceman to find he's on his own in his own time."

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Outside, the Japanese car had been driven away. Tyre tracks over the flowerbed and on the lawn showed the route taken by Rosie as she skirted Donoghue's Rover to make good her escape into leafy, civilised Busby.

Donoghue and Sussock returned to P Division police station, entered the building by the rear Staff Only door, and signed in at the uniform bar.

"Lady to see you, sir," said Phil Hamilton, duty bar officer. He indicated the public waiting area. Donoghue and Sussock turned. The woman stood as they turned. She had donned a long yellow cotton skirt and carried a yellow handbag, but otherwise she was dressed as she was when she had opened the door of Reissmann's house. She walked towards Donoghue and Sussock. "I want to make a statement," she said.

The woman sat in Donoghue's office. Sussock sat in the adjacent chair. Donoghue sat behind his desk pulling gently on his pipe. The young woman seemed to him to be relaxing and held her sunglasses in her hand. Both her eyes were deeply bruised, one eye with noticeably older bruising than the other.

"They're caused by slaps to the side of the head," she said, noting Donoghue looking at her eyes. "If you slap someone hard enough at the side of the head, blood flows into the orbit of the eye and looks like the person has been punched in the eye. But it's a good slapping."

"I know that, Miss Smythe," said Donoghue. "Carry on, please."

"Well, there's not much to tell. I wasn't with him when he topped his wife but I found out about it over time; he wanted a wean and she couldn't get pregnant. He seemed to accept it and they lived together for another ten years without mentioning it. Then last winter he decided he wanted a wean, him a man of sixty-five, wants to be a daddy. So he got shot of her. Since then he's been trying with me, but see, me, I think it's him, he's the one that can't do it. Then last night he had had a good drink, him and his mates, and he suddenly blurted out, 'We've got to move her.' " Rosie Smythe took a deep drag on a nail. "He was so persistent, so me and him and two mates . . ."

"You don't know their names?"

Rosie Smythe smiled. "Would you believe, 'Jimmie'? Called each other 'Jimmie' all the time. We went to the warehouse. I had to drive the van because they three were half cut. He did it on a whim.

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Said the workforce were gossiping and it only needed one of the workforce to prize off the padlock and we'd all be in the pokey. I don't know what he meant 'cos I never . . ."

"Not until last night, you didn't," said Donoghue.

"Aw, listen, Mr. . . ."

"Just carry on."

"Aye, well, so I drove the van to the rear of the warehouse. He knocks off the alarm and we went in. They guys arrived, hatchets and ice picks. He opens up a tub and in the name of God there's a woman in there, stiff, all her clothes, all her jewellery, everything. Just like she was sleeping. They chopped her out of the ice. I've never seen anything like it. . . ."

"And you went along with it?"

"Look mister, I'm nineteen, they were heavy guys, they were mad in the drink, they had hatchets and ice picks, I was scared for my life and I did what I was told."

"All right."

"So they carried her out, stiff as a board, and put her in the back of the van. Told me to turn the heater on to melt her as much as we could. Told me to look for a field. I found myself on the M8 and Reissmann, he looks at where we're going and says, 'You daft wee bitch, you should have gone to Ayreshire from Busby, not through the town,' so I just drove on and got off the M8 and drove down a road and another and another. Saw a gate leading into a field and stopped. They three took her out and carried her into the field. I waited till they came back. I was too scared to drive off alone. But when you called this afternoon, I knew then I had to leave and tell the polis. The van's in the garage at the side of the house."

"I see." Donoghue leaned back in his chair. "Well, Mr. Sussock here will take a full statement from you, tell him all you know."

"What will happen to me?"

"You'll be charged with conspiracy to murder. But in the light of your assistance . . . and extenuating circumstances, I doubt the Fiscal will proceed with the charge. But we have to charge you and detain you."

The woman stood slowly. "He killed his first wife, too," she said. "He told me once when he was drunk."

"Just add that to your statement."

"This way, Rosie." Sussock stood and opened the door.

Donoghue picked up the phone on his desk and tapped a two-figure internal number. "Uniform bar? Good. DI Donoghue here . . . I'd like

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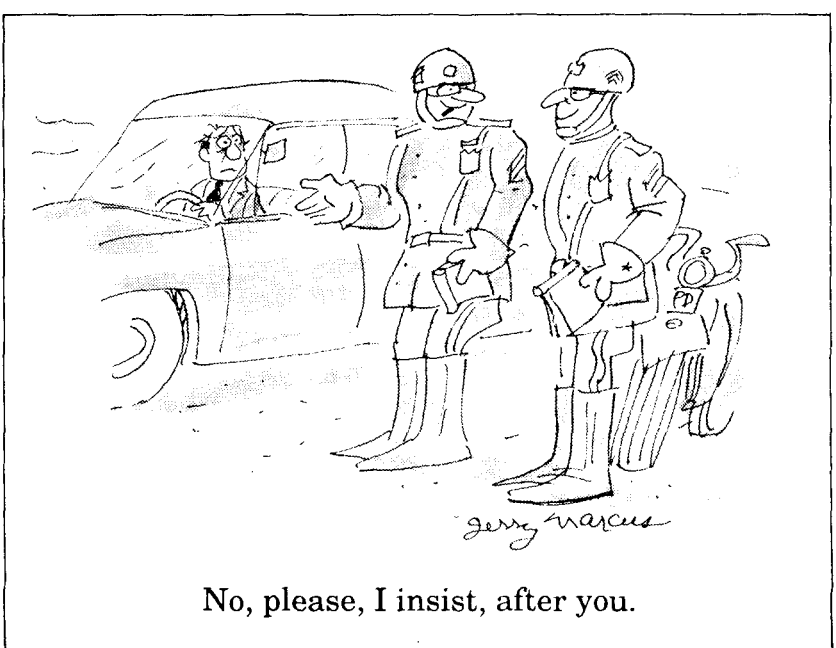
a sergeant and four constables and a van . . . As soon as you like. We're going to Busby to make an arrest in connection with a Code Forty-one. And we'll need to recover a van. It'll be in the garage of the house."

He glanced up at the clock on the wall of his office just as the display changed from 16:40 to 16:41. He would be late home, but, he thought, within acceptable limits. He replaced the phone and dialled an Edinburgh number and spoke briefly to his wife, who sighed and said she'd keep his supper warm. ●



No, please, I insist, after you.

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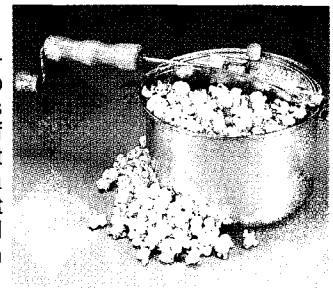

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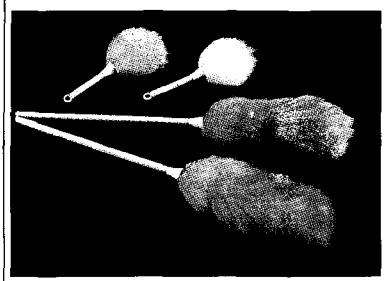

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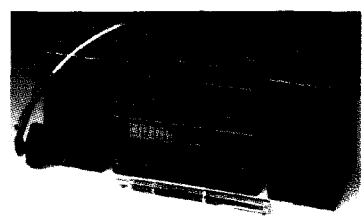

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